

**NEW ZEALAND PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: GENDER AND LOCATION IN
SELECTED CHICK LIT NOVELS**

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ABSTRACT

Through close analysis of five chick lit novels set in New Zealand, this thesis explores the ways these texts adapt and hybridise recognised conventions of typical British and North American chick lit with popular, mythic conceptions of New Zealand cultural identity. The novels included in this study are Michelle Holman's *Divine* (2008) and *Knotted* (2009), Danielle Hawkins's *Dinner at Rose's* (2012) and *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* (2013), and Holly Ford's *Blackpeak Station* (2013). In what follows, I recognise the challenges of defining and labelling "chick lit", the variety of responses to the genre and perceptions of its merits, as well as my selected texts' relationships to New Zealand literary and popular fiction. Incorporating these contextual debates and influences, each chapter focuses on the ways my selected texts both diverge from and reproduce key elements of the genre through their representations of New Zealand women, men, and settings. In doing so, I will argue that these texts construct particular, localised fantasies about femininity, masculinity, and New Zealand in order to appeal to readers. Lastly, this thesis seeks to exemplify how the critical study of chick lit offers important insights into the depiction of women in popular culture, and the variety of issues addressed within their light-hearted narratives.

INTRODUCTION

From Jane Austen in the late 1700s to Bridget Jones in the 1990s, and presently to contemporary chick lit novels written and set in New Zealand, women's writing has experienced great popularity while also attracting a range of critical responses. The chick lit genre first came to prominence during the 1990s, with Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) widely cited as a key founding text (Ferriss and Young 4; Davis-Kahl 18; Knowles 218; Gill and Herdieckerhoff 448; Ryan, "Trivial or Commendable?" 76). Where *Bridget Jones's Diary* offers a British setting, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1997) is recognised as an early North American chick lit text, which was later adapted into the popular television series of the same name that screened from 1998-2004 (Ferriss and Young 6; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 91; Ryan, "Trivial or Commendable?" 73; Ommundsen 107). Since the publication of these texts, many chick lit novels about various aspects of women's experiences have been published and a small body of academic scholarship has focused on the genre. Several conventions of the genre have been adopted and adapted by a number of New Zealand authors. This thesis examines a selection of these texts, exploring the dual influences of British and North American chick lit and popular understandings of New Zealand culture on the representation of women, men, and settings.

CHICK LIT: TOWARDS A DEFINITION

"Chick lit" is a term applied freely to many novels written by and for women about a range of different things. Due to the variety of texts assigned this label, "there are countless variations in describing the genre" (Ryan, "Trivial or Commendable?" 74). How then, should chick lit be defined for the purpose of this thesis? Chick lit author

and commentator Cathy Yardley provides one of the few resources that identifies specific characteristics of the genre in a concise list. She describes the key conventions of classic chick lit in a comic tone evocative of the novels themselves.

The first element she highlights as significant is the prominence of urban settings, which facilitate an “exciting, fast-paced, high-toned lifestyle” (10) for the protagonist. Complementing these cosmopolitan locations, she also identifies the “Glam industries” in which many protagonists work, and their “simply marvellous gay friend” (12) as typical components of the genre. Yardley also observes a tendency to include characters such as the “evil boss”, who is out to destroy the protagonist’s career, and “the cheating lover” who similarly ruins her love life, both of whom get their comeuppance by the end of the novel (12).

Aside from these stock settings and characters, several key features of the genre are more related to protagonists’ common experiences and activities during the course of the narrative. For example, Yardley labels the “man-hunting” period found in many chick lit narratives “Drinks, Dates, and Mr. Wrongs”. This encompasses any combination of disastrous and funny encounters with unsuitable men experienced by the protagonist while on pub-crawls with her friends, speed dating, or internet dating (13). Similarly, “Life implosion syndrome” is the term Yardley uses to describe the multiple catastrophes that tend to go wrong for a chick lit protagonist early in the narrative, such as losing her job, apartment, and boyfriend all at once, setting her on a quest to get her life back on track by the end of the novel (14).

Further characteristics of the genre are linked to the sense of chic style and culture embodied by chick lit. Yardley uses the phrase “Chick Lit Fabulous” to explain the typical emphasis on protagonists’ highly sophisticated and expensive lifestyles, including their obsessions with shopping, consumption, and the inevitable

debts they incur (14). Protagonists gathering with their friends to gossip and chat about their lives over coffee or wine is also identified as a key feature of classic chick lit, with these scenes functioning as a vehicle for “some truly funny witty banter” (15). Finally, frequent references to popular culture “often without any accompanying explanation” (15) are recognised as an important characteristic of the genre, adding cultural context and colour to the narrative. Yardley includes a caveat to this list in her parting advice to any aspiring chick lit writers, noting that several of these features have “been used to the point that many of them are considered Chick Lit clichés” (10). This highlights the genre’s highly formulaic narrative, as she acknowledges that these features have been “done to death” and suggests it is time to “twist” them in order to create more innovative and interesting narratives (16).

Yardley’s list is one of the most comprehensive attempts to define chick lit by its key characteristics (Ryan 74), however there are a few omissions that I see as particularly notable features of the genre. The first is the presence of love interests, particularly the “Right Man” figure, the character implied to be the perfect romantic partner for the protagonist (Smyczyńska 33). The exclusion of prospective love interests from Yardley’s list is indicative of the genre’s central focus on female characters’ daily lives, and shows that the romance plot makes up just one strand of the narrative. Indeed, Caroline J. Smith observes that chick lit novels are “heroine centred narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists” (2). Nevertheless, without exception, at least one male love interest is featured in each novel. As such, the way the genre represents men is significant, especially in terms of which characteristics of masculinities are favoured and which are rejected.

Another central component of chick lit is its emphasis on comedy and entertainment. Juliette Wells argues that the genre privileges “entertainment value, particularly humour, over any challenging or experimental content or style” (49). She emphasises that comedy, both in terms of language and recognition, is critical to the genre’s popularity and success, suggesting that its greatest linguistic achievement “is its satiric employment, and sometimes invention, of contemporary slang and lingo” (64). Comedy in chick lit texts functions as a cathartic experience for the genre’s readers, enabling them to identify with characters’ embarrassing incidents and release their own anxieties through laughter. Andrea Hewett argues that in chick lit “humor works as a coping device ... In recognizing the humor in these common experiences, we’re able to forgive ourselves” (128). By providing readers with an uplifting experience, the successful use of comedy in chick lit is a critical feature of the genre.

A further key feature of chick lit is its capacity to blend social and emotional concerns that affect real women into its romantic comedy narrative. This adds a deeper layer of significance to the genre’s capabilities. Frequently, this takes the form of protagonists’ personal and professional issues, such as the stresses of family life, relationships, motherhood, and their work situation. More serious subjects can also be explored, including the impact of serious illness, unexpected pregnancy, abortion rights, and bereavement. Some chick lit authors also represent the darker side of human experience in narratives that address addiction, depression, domestic violence, and/or sexual violence (notably, Marian Keyes has explored all of these issues in various novels). Chick lit has been praised for its exploration of such diverse and significant themes. As Shari Benstock explains, the genre “crystallizes some of the most important cultural issues women are currently engaged in addressing” (254).

Accordingly, chick lit's inclusion of social concerns and issues must be regarded as a significant feature of the genre.

These issues are presented as strands of the chick lit narrative along with other aspects of protagonists' daily lives, such as their relationships with friends and family, their experiences at work, and their household duties – all running parallel to the romantic comedy plotline. The inclusion of these non-romantic elements distinguishes chick lit from novels of the popular romance genre, like those published by *Mills and Boon* and *Harlequin*. Based on extensive ethnographic research on readers of popular romances and their narrative preferences, Janice Radway identifies the “resolute focus on a single, developing relationship between heroine and hero” as “the most striking characteristic of the ideal romance” (122). This overwhelmingly prioritises the union between the heroine and her hero as the central narrative concern – unlike chick lit which, as explained above, prioritises a range of narrative concerns. Stephanie Harzewski explains this distinction: in a manner that is “different from the Harlequin novel, chick lit novels are ultimately romances of the self” (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 57), re-emphasising the genre's coverage of many different aspects of the lives of contemporary women, instead of a singular focus on their romantic pursuits. Alison Umminger also observes that in many texts of the genre, a “quest for romance is entirely secondary to the ongoing battle chick lit's heroines are engaging with themselves” (240). Consequently, the protagonists' concerns and their resolution often take precedence – or are at least given equal weight – to the romantic plot, distinguishing the genre from that of popular romance.

Since its inception in the 1990s, chick lit continues to expand on and diversify its formula. Chick lit written about teenage protagonists for a young adult readership has been dubbed “Chick Lit Jr.” (Webb Johnson 141), novels focusing particularly on

the demands of motherhood are recognised as “Mommy Lit” (Hewett 119), while texts featuring middle aged protagonists are becoming increasingly known as “Hen Lit” (Yardley 21). Yardley also explores more recent developments and deviations from the features of classic chick lit such as cross overs into the thriller genre (17), and some bloggers have nicknamed novels located in rural settings “farm lit” (Nawotka; “Chick Lit Is Dead, Long Live Farm Lit”), although this term and sub-genre has not yet been recognised by critics or scholars. So, although it is possible to ascertain the characteristics of conventional chick lit, they are not fixed.

The variety of novels that fall under the catchall label “chick lit” draws attention to the inadequacies of this term for a single, definable category of fiction. Nevertheless, as Cecilia Konchar Farr observes, the success of chick lit:

reminds us again what makes novels work for readers: main characters they like and can identify with, recognizable depictions of their lives and fantasies, reaffirmation of key cultural values, and, damn it, good solid entertaining stories that make them want to run to the bookstore and buy another one. (212)

This explains how chick lit appeals to readers through a reflection of the realities and fantasies of contemporary women. Harzewski also identifies this blend of “realist tendencies ... with the fantasy elements of romance” (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 56) as an important feature of the genre, as does Jessica Lyn Van Slooten, who notes that “these novels hover between fantasy and reality” (237). Others still emphasise that this perceived realism encourages readers to engage and identify with the protagonists’ experiences (Knowles 228; Colgan; Yardley 150). I see this fusion of realism and fantasy as fundamental to the genre. It underpins every aspect of chick lit narratives, influencing the characterisation of protagonists, love interests, and the

depiction of geographical and cultural settings. Therefore, in the following chapters, my analysis will explore precisely how this dynamic operates and its effects on the genre and its readers.

The definition of the genre that I will work with in this thesis, then, is one that takes all these established conventions into consideration. Though it is important to be aware that “the parameters and definitions [of chick lit] are evolving daily” (Yardley 4), for the purpose of this thesis I am working with a broad definition of chick lit as popular fiction that comically focuses on female characters and the various joys, desires, and stresses of their daily lives.

REACTIONS TO THE GENRE

According to Harzewski, the term “chick lit” was first used in print in 1988 as a “dismissive tag” for a Princeton University course titled “Female Literary Tradition” (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 44; Betterton 113). Imbued with highly gendered connotations of commercialism and superficiality (Ferriss and Young 2), the “chick lit” label was then ironically adopted as the title of Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell’s co-edited anthology of avant-garde short stories, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, published in 1995 (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 44). Aside from its central focus on women’s lives, this collection has little in common with contemporary chick lit. Harzewski explains that “[t]he edgy and in some instances sardonic quality of the narrators ... differs significantly from the confused though upbeat temper of the commercial counterpart”. She adds that what is now recognised as chick lit “has reached wider audiences in part because of its greater proximity to conventions of mass fiction, such as verisimilitude, chapter demarcations, and linear plotting” (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 150). After the publication of Mazza and

DeShell's anthology, in the second half of the 1990s the term "chick lit" was "co-opted" (Konchar Farr 209) as a marketing label for commercial popular fiction intended for a female audience. Emphasising her distaste at the subsequent recasting of the term and the texts it now represents, Mazza argues that "somehow chick lit had morphed into books flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels" (18). She further asserts "the chicks in commercial chick lit ... have stripped themselves of irony" (28). The following chapters will examine the validity of the latter claim with respect to my selected texts. First, however, it is important to discuss the way the genre's name has been used to perpetuate preconceptions of its contents as silly and shallow.

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of taste and distinction are useful to demonstrate how certain art forms are privileged over others, rendering them as "high" or "low" culture (Grenfell 96). Bourdieu explains that people "distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (6). As a result, "[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6), which is to say that people's preferences imply a lot about their social class. Bourdieu also highlights the "pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects", identifying the "network of oppositions" between "high" and "low", "fine" and "coarse", "unique" and "common", among others (468). According to him, this "network has its ultimate source in the opposition between the 'élite' of the dominant and the 'mass' of the dominated" (468). This dynamic enables readers of literary novels to be seen as superior to (or "dominant" over) those who read commercial or popular fiction such as chick lit. Of course, it is entirely possible to read fiction from multiple categories and inhabit different regimes of taste preferences while reading different genres. Yet firm ideas about what

constitutes “quality” literature remain entrenched, as demonstrated by reactions to the chick lit genre.

Many chick lit authors, commentators, and academics have observed the limitations of the “chick lit” label, arguing it is reductive and derogatory. Joanna Webb Johnson explains this site of contention: “cut the word *literature* down to *lit* and suddenly you have implied lower quality work” (141, italics in original). The chick lit label tends to be assigned to contemporary women’s fiction by book publishers, sellers, and reviewers. It is rarely a term that is claimed by the authors themselves. Even if a novel is positioned as chick lit by its cover design, it is very unusual to see the words “chick lit” explicitly written anywhere on the book jacket. Chick lit writer and activist Lucy-Anne Holmes offers her take on the genre’s label:

As a feminist, I feel that the term is a demeaning one; it's hard to imagine "puppy lit" or similar being used to describe books written by men about life and love, authors such as Nick Hornby and David Nicholls. (“Chick lit? Hate the Term. Love the Genre”)

This expresses the view that the term “chick lit” itself denigrates the work of female authors, and draws attention to the sexist implications of this label by highlighting that there is no equivalent term for male authors writing on similar themes. Davis-Kahl (19) and Harzewski (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 3) further discuss the problematic nature of the label, as does author Joanna Trollope, who wishes that romantic comedy novels be instead called “wit lit” (“Why I Love Chick Lit”).

Successful chick lit author Marian Keyes has spoken about the chick lit label many times, having come to terms with the way it is employed by both the publishing industry and the media. She argues:

It used to bother me because it's so belittling – and it's meant to be belittling. It's as if it's saying, "Oh you silly girls, with your pinkness and shoes, how will you ever run the world?" But as I've matured (haha) I've realized that I'm very proud of what I write about and I know that the books I write bring happiness and comfort to people. I wish that our world was far less patriarchal than it is, but we're all doing our best to bring about positive changes. (Grassi)

This uneasy acceptance of the "chick lit" name is reflective of the ways that popular novels written by women are burdened by their commercialised and kitschy status. Philip Fisher argues that the distinction between "art" and "kitsch" novels depends on the assumption that kitsch is unchallenging and only reproduces "stereotypes and familiar feelings" (19). Chick lit's narrative emphasis on shopping and consumption mentioned above, along with the way it is marketed, has allowed the genre to be cast as a commercial rather than an artistic enterprise (Smith 2; Ferriss and Young 7; Scanlon 921; Konchar Farr 203). Smith's book *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* particularly examines the commercialism within several novels, focusing largely on protagonists' engagement with women's advice manuals, magazines, self-help books, and romantic comedy films. Van Slooten argues that the combination of "consumption with romance makes for a powerful genre that plays into its readers' fantasies and desires" (237), highlighting the genre's relationship to its readership. Harzewski links the emphasis on consumerism within many narratives to the critical dismissal of the genre as a whole, explaining that its "denigration stems in part from its gendered reclamation of the novel's commodity roots" ("Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners" 35). The circulation of the genre's label

only serves to reinforce its commercialised status and the ensuing judgements made about it.

The study of chick lit is an opportunity to simultaneously acknowledge the genre's very name as sexist and degrading, but also to understand its widespread appeal among readers. Equally, the term insufficiently describes the myriad of different issues and subject matter that fall under the chick lit umbrella. For better or for worse, chick lit is the name given to much fiction written and read by women. This is largely a result of publishers' marketing of the genre, which both creates and responds to a very real, widespread, and committed taste for the associations of the term by readers. Accordingly, the term "chick lit" is proving to be durable in spite of its inadequacies. While the established cliché may be "don't judge a book by its cover", perhaps we should also be saying: "don't judge a genre by its label".

Regardless of the genre's name, chick lit is enormously popular, and has enjoyed lucrative commercial success since its inception (Ferriss and Young 2, Konchar Farr 205). Despite claims in 2011 that chick lit was "staggering on its heels" due to falling sales and an oversaturation of the market, chick lit titles are still regular features on bestsellers lists. A notable example is Jojo Moyes' 2012 release *Me Before You*, which as of October 2015 has sold more than 5 million copies worldwide (Delgado), and has been made into a film due for release in June 2016 by MGM, with Moyes having written the screenplay herself (Siegel). Evidently, the appeal of chick lit is still strong and has vast potential for profit.

Nevertheless, established literary authors and members of the public frequently dismiss chick lit. High-brow author Dame Beryl Bainbridge famously deemed chick lit to be "froth", while similarly lauded Doris Lessing rendered it "instantly forgettable" in a radio interview that sparked ferocious debate over the

genre's worth (Ezard). Members of the public have also documented their scathing responses to the genre. A 2012 article published in the *Guardian* online, titled "The Only Problem with 'Chick Lit' is the Name", sparked fierce debate. Many readers expressed their distaste for chick lit in the comments section below the article: for example, one declared that "a large chunk of chick lit is low-brow shite, aimed at the kind of people who like watching soap operas. Crap is crap is crap, however you dress it up" (Geras). Similarly a 2005 entry in *Urban Dictionary*, an interactive online resource allowing anyone to add their explanation of popular culture terms and slang, defines chick lit as "books written by bad female writers, aimed towards stupid female readers... Always about trendy twentysomething bitches whining about their jobs and relationships" ("Chick Lit"). Evidently, even among those who engage with popular culture forums, chick lit arouses strong negative reactions that are also projected onto readers of this genre.

It has been argued that the dismissal of chick lit is an extension of habitually derisive attitudes towards women's writing. George Eliot's 1856 condemnation of women's writing as "frothy, prosy, pious, pedantic" in her essay *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* has been cited by chick lit scholars as evidence of the tradition of disdain towards women's writing (Davis-Kahl 19; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 1). The level of scorn directed at female writers was such that Eliot, a female writer born Mary Ann Evans, chose to disguise her gender by selecting a male *nom de plume* in order to avoid comparison with the popular women's writing that she saw as trivial. More recently, author J K Rowling published three thriller novels under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith in 2013, 2014, and 2015 respectively. While presumably motivated by a desire to distance herself from the *Harry Potter* franchise, she was criticised for choosing a male *nom de plume*, rather than a female one (Hugel).

Though her work is not chick lit, it is popular fiction, and the decision to conceal her gender suggests that commercial female authors are a long way from being evaluated on their writing alone.

The subjugation of mass-market female authors is seen more clearly through the genre's comparison to commercial fiction written by men. While many critics dismiss chick lit, male authors writing books with thematic and comic similarities are often lauded, even being nominated for prestigious awards. Such authors include Nick Hornby, Tony Parsons and David Nicholls, whose most recent novel *Us* was long listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2014 ("The Man Booker Prize 2014"). These books have been ironically termed "Lad Lit" or sometimes even "Dick Lit" (Ferriss and Young 6-7), though these labels have remained jokes and have not been adopted by publishers, critics, and readers in the same way that "chick lit" has. David Nicholls's phenomenally successful *One Day* (2009) features a similar narrative and plot device as Lisa Jewell's earlier *Vince and Joy* (2005). Both of which follow a couple who met in the 1980s and track their lives together and apart over the next thirty or so years. I am not suggesting here that there was any plagiarism or "copying" of Jewell's concept, but merely pointing out that despite these similarities in plot and tone, *One Day* was made into a film (2011) and was declared "profound" (Ritchie), while *Vince and Joy* was not. Book critic Helen Falconer further highlights the sexist bias against women's popular fiction, noting "I have seen books by male authors critically praised which, if they'd been written by a woman, would have been hurled into the chick-lit bin unread" (Falconer). This is not to say that these so-called "Dick Lit" texts are undeserving of their praise, but that in general, commercial women's fiction has not been given the same gravitas and has been undeservingly cast as inferior.

One of the main criticisms of chick lit is that it has been “frequently pointed to as evidence, if not the cause, of feminism’s denigration” (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 8). Davis-Kahl similarly reports that critics often read chick lit as “a betrayal of feminism and its call for equality ... if women are writing unashamedly about clothes, shopping, drinking to excess and sex, then how far have we truly come?” (19). Chick lit has been widely labelled as a postfeminist genre by many critics (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 8; Arthurs 83; Whelehan 186). Postfeminism is defined in *The Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication* as “A discourse popularized by the mass media in the 1990s reflecting a reaction against the feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980s, often on the basis that the ‘battle of the sexes’ is over” (Chandler and Munday, “Post-Feminism”). However, even as they react against it, postfeminist texts nevertheless “incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism” (2) according to Tasker and Negra, who therefore suggest there is a “complex relationship between culture, politics and feminism” (1). They argue that such texts emphasise “educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment” (2). Many of these aspects align with elements of conventional chick lit, which often includes a protagonist’s successful career alongside a re-enchantment with domesticity, a preoccupation with glamour and beauty, and their enduring quest to find the perfect romantic partner.

However, other critics have acknowledged chick lit’s potential as a medium for addressing feminist concerns (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 169; Gruslytė, Taujanskaitė, and Žemaitytė 128; Hewett 130; Ryan, “A Feminism of Their Own?” 92). Feminism is defined in the *The Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication* as:

An ideology and a social movement based on the need to end the subordination of women to men in contemporary society. Beyond this shared perspective, there are multiple **feminisms** organized around a polarization between those stressing the basic *sameness* of men and women (androgyny) and those emphasizing *difference* (whether biological, cultural, or social)—the latter sometimes adopting essentialist stances and/or separatist strategies. (Chandler and Munday, “Feminism”, italics and bold font in original)

The plurality of “feminisms” is supported by several critics (Kemp and Squires 3; Robbins 3; Austin 4–5), but also marks a collectivity of feminist ideas (Robbins 14). In their definition of feminism, Chandler and Munday also explain that:

It is conventionally divided into three historical ‘waves’: the *first wave* from the Enlightenment thinking of the late 18th century, based on advancing women's rights; the *second wave* of the anti-sexist women's liberation movement from the late 1960s; and *third wave* feminism from the 1990s, an era of theorization which has witnessed increasing fragmentation. (Italics in original)

Feminist concerns addressed within the genre include abortion rights, domestic and sexual violence, and the 21st century demands of balancing careers with family life.

Additionally, some of the genre’s most prominent authors self-identify as feminists, including Marian Keyes (Flood) and Candace Bushnell (Schetzer). Lucy Anne Holmes, a feminist chick lit author and the founder of the *No More Page 3* campaign to stop *The Sun* newspaper in Britain from printing photographs of topless glamour models, shows that it is possible to be a feminist engaged in political debates about sexism and equality, while at the same time stating of chick lit: “I am

unapologetic in my love for this genre” (Holmes). She cites the work of Kira Cochrane, who argues in her book *All the Rebel Women* (2013) that modern feminism is entering a fourth wave. Cochrane bases this claim on women’s collective mass engagement with social media and online campaigns such as the *Everyday Sexism Project* (“The Everyday Sexism Project”), which is a platform for women to highlight their everyday experiences of sexist behaviour and publicise their stories. Holmes expresses her belief that alongside such advancements in technology and engagement with social media, “chick lit, too, could play an exciting role in communicating this fourth wave of feminism and female empowerment to readers,” emphasising the genre’s potential as a consciousness raising tool. As such, feminist and postfeminist discourses overlap and intersect within the chick lit genre, and can be read to support both progressive and conservative gender politics. Accordingly, in the following chapters, a crucial part of my analysis is an examination of my selected chick lit texts’ links to ideas about feminism, postfeminism, and gender.

One aspect of the genre that has been problematised is its reinforcement of heterosexual norms by almost always placing a “middle class, heterosexual protagonist” at the centre of the narrative (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 20). The genre overwhelmingly features female characters looking for “Mr Right” (Kiernan 207; Ryan, “Trivial or Commendable?” 72; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 28), and prioritises the lives of heterosexual women. This marginalises other sexualities, with homosexual male and female characters occasionally featuring as friends of the protagonists in chick lit novels such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* by Helen Fielding (1996), *Angels* by Marian Keyes (2002), and *Blackpeak Station*, by Holly Ford (2013). As A. Rochelle Mabry observes, although chick lit allows its protagonists to “express desires that may lie outside of the “happily-ever-after”

marriage to Prince Charming,” they still “tend to present fairly conservative images of women and their place in society” (192). The online website *Goodreads* has compiled a small list of “Queer Chick Lit” titles (“Queer Chicklit Shelf”), however “very few chick lit novels feature lesbian characters” (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 146). Like the vast majority of the genre, my selected texts all focus centrally on the heterosexual romance between the female protagonist and her male love interest.

A further criticism of chick lit has been that it lacks literary depth in terms of language and execution. Wells has been at the forefront of this debate, arguing:

When we look in chick lit for such literary elements as imaginative use of language, inventive and thought provoking metaphors, layers of meaning, complex characters, and innovative handling of conventional structure, we come up essentially empty-handed. (64)

While I argue that several chick lit novels do feature some, if not all, of the above features (examples include *I Don't Know How She Does it* by Alison Pearson (2003), and *The Brightest Star in the Sky* by Marian Keyes (2009)), I do not dispute that chick lit features comparatively fewer of those “literary elements” found in texts that tend to be classified by publishers, booksellers, critics, and scholars alike as “literary fiction”.

Wells’s dismissal of the genre on the basis that it is not “literary” stems from the kinds of class and taste distinctions highlighted by Bourdieu discussed above.

Judgements such as these result from the application of conventional criteria for determining the merits of literary fiction (developed amongst modernist writers and literature academics of the early twentieth century), to a different genre. Chick lit belongs to the separate tradition of popular fiction, which has always aspired to fulfil different aims. As Fisher explains, these two tastes for popular and literary categories of writing diverged at the end of the nineteenth century (19–20).

Konchar Farr questions the value of assessing chick lit's apparent lack of "literary elements", listing what she sees as some of the most appealing aspects of fiction:

sympathetic connections, even identification, from readers to character; honest appeals to genuine emotion; exciting stories that inspire conversation (and consumption); historical, political, or geographical information subtly shared; comfortable settings that tend toward the domestic; and social messages that call readers to action.

(209)

She argues that these qualities ought to be taken seriously and assigned “aesthetic, not just cultural or social, value, one that notices when these qualities are deftly deployed with precision or craft” (210). Davis-Kahl echoes this idea, arguing that the literary dismissal of chick lit “diminishes the authors’ voices, perspectives, and their experiences to the point of exclusion” (20). Furthermore, it belittles readers of these novels, deriding their preference for such apparently inferior books. It is true that not all chick lit is created equal. Like any genre, some chick lit novels are more layered and complex than others, although that is not to say that those with comparatively less depth should be dismissed out of hand. To do so would fall back on the distinctions between depth and surface, complexity and simplicity that Bourdieu and Fisher point out, which are constructed in order to privilege the literary novel over the popular one. As a fan of chick lit as well as a scholar, it is possible to take an interest in chick lit, and in other genres of literature (including highbrow classics), while also being alert to the ways in which texts are keyed into a range of social concerns, politics and inequalities. In this respect, the study of chick lit illustrates that women have multiple priorities, in life as well as in literature.

In fact, the “literary” dismissal of chick lit – or the dismissal of the genre that relies on insisting it is not “literary” – depends on ignoring the many literary traditions that chick lit novels do revisit, often in order to infuse them with contemporary comedy. In particular, this critique involves neglecting the genre’s relationship to women’s writing of the past. Harzewski provides a detailed analysis of the literary traditions sustained in chick lit, including the bildungsroman, the novel of manners, the reworking of the marriage plot, and prose and popular romance (“Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners” 31). Further scholarship has also aligned the genre with the conventions of the consciousness-raising novel through its ability to draw attention to important social issues (Gruslytė, Taujanskaitė, and Žemaitytė 128; Whelehan 181). Novels by female authors now respected as “literary” have also been cited as predecessors of contemporary chick lit. Particular academic attention has been given to the genre’s links to the work of Jane Austen, but the Brontë sisters and Edith Wharton have also been credited with influencing its development (Ferriss and Young 5; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 4, 60; Wells 48; Kiernan 207; Ryan, “Trivial or Commendable?” 76; Séllei 175). In particular, scholars acknowledge (as does the author Helen Fielding) that the narrative of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* draws heavily on that of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, complete with Mr Mark Darcy as the central love interest (Ferriss and Young 5; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 60; Wells 48; Ryan, “Trivial or Commendable?” 76; Séllei 175). Indeed, much of the genre shares Austen’s focus on social observation, wit, romance, and happy endings. In providing similarly joyous conclusions to their novels, chick lit authors evoke the sensibility expressed by Jane Austen in the first line of the final chapter of *Mansfield Park* (1814): “Let other pens

dwell on guilt and misery” (386). Contemporary chick lit’s commercial success shows that a desire for happy endings has not abated over time.

Taking all the above into account, in the following chapters I will argue that in spite of the genre’s detractors, chick lit provides an important platform within popular culture from which to explore issues relating to the everyday lives of contemporary women in an accessible and funny, if fanciful way. The analysis of my selected texts seeks to show that the dismissal of chick lit for its apparent superficiality is in fact a superficial reading of the genre itself.

NEW ZEALAND CHICK LIT AND OTHER LOCAL FICTION

I first came across New Zealand chick lit when I read *Dinner At Rose’s* by Danielle Hawkins in 2012. It was different from the other chick lit I had read, which was primarily by British and North American authors and set in these countries. It seemed to me that with the New Zealand setting came a more pragmatic sensibility inherent to the central characters’ personalities. I sought out more chick lit written and set in New Zealand by authors such as Michelle Holman, Holly Ford, Felicity Price, and Wendyl Nissen. In the process I found that like those of British and North American texts, the protagonists in New Zealand chick lit are predominantly white, middle class, and heterosexual. Nevertheless, I became interested in the specific New Zealand sensibilities evoked in several of these novels, many of which are bestsellers within the category of New Zealand fiction. As well as being distinct from British and North American texts, these novels also felt different from the stereotypically “dark” works of New Zealand literature I had read, and so my interest in an academic study of these more light-hearted texts was piqued.

There is some precedent for analysing chick lit novels from countries outside Britain and North America. Mary Ryan has produced a number of articles about Irish chick lit, particularly with reference to the novels of Marian Keyes, exploring how they pose challenges to conservative Irish society (“A Feminism of Their Own?”; “Stepping Out from the Margins”; “The Bodies of Chick Lit: Positive Representations of the Female Body in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction”; “Then and Now: Memories of a Patriarchal Ireland in the Work of Marian Keyes”). Eva Chen analyses WeiHui’s *Shanghai Baby*, a Chinese chick lit novel first published in 1999 before being translated into English in 2001, and argues it challenges conservative attitudes to female sexuality in China. A small body of Hungarian chick lit has been explored by Nóra Séllei, who argues the popularity of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* influenced the development of new texts set in Hungary. Novita Dewi has written about Islamic chick lit, arguing it refreshingly depicts Muslim women in urban, glamorous locations. Wenche Ommundsen considers three different cultural contexts in her article, “Sex and the Global City”, analysing the representation of women in Annie Wang’s *The People’s Republic of Desire* (2006) which is set in China, Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), which is set in Saudi Arabia, and Anita Heiss’s novels *Not Meeting Mr. Right* (2007) and *Avoiding Mr. Right* (2008), which feature Aboriginal Australian women as protagonists. These studies are each highly specific to the content and cultural context of the novels analysed, but they indicate that there is considerable interest in how authors from different cultural backgrounds adopt and adjust the established conventions of British and North American chick lit for different audiences.

This thesis concentrates on the ways New Zealand chick lit is influenced by both the conventions of British and North American chick lit and mythologies about

local culture, which gives way to adherences and deviations from the typical chick lit formula expressed above. For the purposes of my investigation, I have chosen to focus in depth on a selection of five texts set in New Zealand and written by New Zealand authors. These are Michelle Holman's *Divine* (2008) and *Knotted* (2009), Danielle Hawkins's *Dinner at Rose's* (2012) and *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* (2013), and Holly Ford's *Blackpeak Station* (2013). A summary of the narratives of these texts can be found in Appendix One. I considered fifteen New Zealand chick lit texts for inclusion in this study, and compared their representation of women, men, rural and city locations, as well as the protagonists' romantic and platonic relationships, interests, and anxieties before making my selection. Although a number of successful New Zealand authors writing chick lit, such as Sarah-Kate Lynch and Nicky Pellegrino, favour international characters and settings, I decided to focus on novels set in New Zealand to explore how this location is presented differently to those of other countries. A table of the novels considered is provided in Appendix Two, which includes some basic details about each text and demonstrates the principles for inclusion applied for this study. While focusing on the five texts enumerated above, in what follows I do however occasionally draw on additional contemporary New Zealand chick lit novels to compare and contrast across a larger sample of texts.

My selected texts occupy a small sector of the New Zealand market, which is dominated by international titles, both chick lit and otherwise. In 2014, sales of New Zealand fiction made up just 6% of all fiction sold domestically (Heritage). Nevertheless, many New Zealand chick lit texts achieve bestseller status according to the Booksellers New Zealand website, which presents the Neilson Weekly Bestsellers lists every Thursday. For example, Holly Ford's *Blackpeak Station* was number one

on the list shortly after its release (“Nielsen Weekly Bestsellers List: Week Ending 06 April 2013”), while Lottie Bloom’s *The Road to Lilyfields* was on the list for eight consecutive weeks (“Nielsen Weekly Bestsellers Lists: For Week Ending Saturday 16 May”), and in one notable week in 2011, Michelle Holman’s novels *Barefoot*, *Bonkers*, and *Knotted* occupied three of the ten top places (“Nielsen Weekly Bestsellers List: Week Ending 19 March 2011”). Hence it is clear that these books are popular within the New Zealand fiction category. As Harriet Allan, fiction publisher for Penguin Random House New Zealand, points out, “bestseller rankings are certainly worth taking as a measure of appeal (and there will be numerous copies borrowed from libraries or friends that don’t show in sales figures)” (Personal correspondence, 29 February 2016). Allan’s comment highlights the variety of ways readers come across novels, but even taken by itself, the enthusiastic response suggested by bestseller rankings indicates there is a readership for witty and entertaining novels that focus on the concerns, experiences, relationships, and fantasies of contemporary New Zealand female characters.

Previous studies of New Zealand novels have often analysed masculinities as a central component of many literary texts. Jock Phillips’s *A Man’s Country* (1987), Kai Jensen’s *Whole Men* (1996), Alastair Fox’s *The Ship of Dreams: Masculinity in Contemporary New Zealand Fiction* (2008), Worth, Paris, and Allen’s *The Life of Brian: Masculinities, Sexuality and Health in New Zealand* (2002), and Law, Campbell, and Dolan’s *Masculinities in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (1999) are all books that analyse the representation of men in New Zealand novels and culture. The abundance of such studies (unmatched by any equivalent volumes that consider femininities in New Zealand fiction) indicates that a focus on masculinities has been a convention of New Zealand literature, and indeed scholarship. By contrast, this thesis

highlights the ways my selected chick lit texts prioritise female protagonists' concerns and desires, while also illustrating how particular mythic traits of masculinities are reproduced, revised, and romanticised through male characters' supporting roles as love interests.

The representation of New Zealand settings has also been explored by existing scholarship. Lawrence Jones explains that the depiction of settings in colonial New Zealand literature reflected a desire to convert wild, native landscapes into farmed and agricultural land ("Versions of the Dream" 188). As a result of this "dream", mastery of the landscape has also been identified as common struggle in New Zealand literary texts (Stachurski 2; Jones, "Versions of the Dream" 188). Isolation is another recognised motif in New Zealand literature (D'Cruz), and many scholars discuss the tradition of the "Man Alone" figure (Jones, "The Novel" 202–207; Jensen 17; A. Calder 234). A melancholic, depressive, and even violent mood has also been identified in many celebrated New Zealand novels (Evans 147; A. Calder 234; Eggleton 17). By contrast, this thesis demonstrates how my selected texts re-cast the New Zealand setting as a place of community, hospitality, and healing.

Aside from acclaimed literary texts, attitudes to New Zealand popular fiction mirror the distaste expressed towards chick lit internationally. Little academic attention has been paid to the category of New Zealand popular fiction, with the exception of Terry Sturm's chapter "Popular Fiction" in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* (1998). As he observes, "[h]igh-cultural dismissals of popular culture have been very powerful in New Zealand" (Sturm, "Popular Fiction" 576). Despite these elitist values, popular fiction nevertheless "provides rich insights (directly or indirectly) into New Zealand society" more explicitly than serious fiction (Sturm, "Popular Fiction" 579), emphasising the value of studying such novels.

The most popular works of New Zealand fiction have been the comic novels of Barry Crump. He sold in excess of one million books (Sturm, “Popular Fiction” 609), and his titles were reprinted many times (Magner). Crump’s first novel, *A Good Keen Man*, was published in 1960. Following the novel’s phenomenal sales the titular phrase became “part of the New Zealand vernacular” (Sturm, “Popular Fiction” 609), personifying the Kiwi Bloke stereotype. More recently, his novel *Wild Pork and Watercress* was adapted for film by screenwriter and director Taika Waititi. The film *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* was released in March 2016 to immense commercial success, making a record breaking \$1.3 million in its opening weekend, the highest ever for a New Zealand film as of May 2016 (“Hunt for the Wilderpeople Sets New Box Office Record”).

Although they have not remained household names like Crump, some of New Zealand’s female writers of popular fiction have been no less prolific and successful. Mary Scott, for example, wrote over twenty-five rural romantic comedies between 1953 and 1978 (Wevers), and enjoyed widespread sales in New Zealand and internationally, particularly in Germany (Sturm “Popular Fiction” 598). Before her, Rosemary Rees and Nelle Scanlan also wrote domestic romances in the 1930s (Sturm “Popular Fiction” 587). Scott’s career also bears parallel to some of chick lit’s most celebrated authors, Helen Fielding and Candace Bushnell. Like Fielding and Bushnell, Scott began her career by writing serialised comic stories that were published in weekly newspapers before eventually turning her attention to novels (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 58; Sturm, “Popular Fiction” 598). She also expressed an awareness that her novels were “thoroughly [stereo]typed” (Scott 199), and not considered to be of literary value, like many contemporary chick lit texts. As

a result of her subject matter, popularity, and formulaic narratives, I see Scott's novels as predecessors of New Zealand chick lit.

Another precursor of New Zealand chick lit is Fiona Kidman's *A Breed of Women*, written in 1979. This novel is less comic and more radical in tone than those of Scott and much contemporary chick lit. However, it was "phenomenally popular" (Stachurski xlv). Likewise, its central focus on a female protagonist, and her journey to self-discovery and acceptance is something all chick lit protagonists share. This thesis shows how my selected texts reflect and reject particular aspects of both literary and popular New Zealand fiction, as well as many conventions of British and North American chick lit.

MY APPROACH

The title of this thesis alludes to the frequent comparisons and links drawn between contemporary chick lit and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but also reflects the cultural values and prejudices present in New Zealand chick lit that result from tenacious myths about New Zealand people and places. The following chapters draw on a range of theoretical ideas and terms, some of which, like Bourdieu's concepts of taste and distinction, I have already discussed. Since there are many different approaches to textual analysis, I will clarify those most pertinent to my research.

Mythologies, or myths, are "system(s) of communication, ... a mode of signification" (Barthes, *Mythologies* 117). Specifically, myths naturalise particular assumptions and values about something as if they are inherent, rather than culturally produced (Barthes 142). The separation between something and what it signifies is invisible. In other words, "it *seems* that denotation and connotation are the same" (Stachurski xxii, italics in original). When myths are naturalised in this way, "myth

consumers” do not see that these mythologies are artificially constructed. This thesis deals particularly with myths about “New Zealand cultural identity”, to use Belich and Wevers’s term, such as the Kiwi Bloke stereotype, ideas of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and “Kiwi Ingenuity”, watching or playing rugby, and characteristics of pragmatism and lack of pretension. These qualities are already mythologised as being quintessentially “kiwi”, and are affirmed as such in my selected texts to varying degrees.

Iser’s concept of the “implied reader” (34) is also useful to analyse the dynamic between texts and their readers. The implied reader describes “the kind of person constructed by a text’s underlying assumptions; someone, that is, who would accept and agree with the implied” (Stachurski xxv). Of course, individuals vary widely, and read texts differently in numerous and personal ways. As Stuart Hall argues, some people accept the dominant (or preferred) reading of a given text, while others make negotiated or even oppositional readings (171–173). However, the popularity of chick lit, and its relatively consistent reliance on recognisable character types, settings, and motifs, suggests that the notion of an “implied reader” – one who at least for the duration of the novel broadly accepts and enjoys the myths and the meanings produced – is a useful critical concept. Smith argues that chick lit protagonists “reflect the demographic of their reading audience, connecting the texts directly to their readers” (2). Though I am wary of equating the central characters with real women so crudely, it seems plausible to assume that many readers will identify with the tastes of the characters, which generally affirm mythic conceptions of New Zealand cultural identity. Stanley Fish’s concept of “interpretive communities” – which are groups of readers who share particular “interpretive strategies” (13-14) – also complements this approach to the genre’s implications

about and for its readers. At the same time, in what follows I will be alert to the ways in which the texts demonstrate potential contradictions to, or conflicts within, the operation of these myths and readerly identifications.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, which in turn analyse the representation of women, men and settings in my selected chick lit texts, illustrating the dual influences of British and North American chick lit and existing myths about New Zealand culture and society. As well as highlighting similarities between the texts, my analysis identifies any complexities and variations between the novels' depictions of these elements.

Chapter One investigates the representation of women in New Zealand chick lit, particularly in relation to the protagonists' appearances, careers, and multiple responsibilities. Drawing on the work of Harzewski, Yardley, and Davis-Kahl, I highlight the similarities and differences between the protagonists of my selected texts and those of British and North American chick lit, exploring how understandings of New Zealand identity are likely to influence their characterisation.

Chapter Two examines the representation of men in New Zealand chick lit, with respect to both the love interests and secondary male characters featured in these texts. With reference to the work of Phillips, Bannister, and Bell regarding the Kiwi Bloke stereotype, I argue that specific traits of this figure are favoured, revised and rejected. This chapter also analyses the inclusion of "other" versions of masculinity through the inclusion of gay and transgender characters, to explore how they are represented in accepting and sympathetic ways.

Finally, Chapter Three explores the representation of New Zealand geographical and cultural settings in my selected texts. Drawing on the work of Barthes, Williams, Calder, and Evans, I examine the prominence of rural settings,

their contrast with cities, and the depiction of protagonists' close relationships to "nature". This chapter also examines the inclusion of recognisable elements of New Zealand culture, brands, and entertainment, with reference to the work of Bell and Bourdieu to discuss the related concepts of Kiwiana and taste.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to identify and analyse the distinguishing features of New Zealand chick lit in order to establish the ways it is both internationally and locally unique. I will also aim to demonstrate how – since chick lit is a genre that unashamedly focuses on female characters' lives, and as such is a reflection of contemporary women's realities and fantasies – the ongoing trivialisation of this genre minimises women's voices and experiences. Finally, I will seek to exemplify how the critical study of chick lit offers important insights into the representation of women in popular culture, and the variety of issues addressed within their engaging, comic narratives.

CHAPTER ONE: THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

“It is now a truth universally acknowledged that the history of the novel is gendered”, according to critic and academic Cecilia Konchar Farr (205). This is particularly true of chick lit – a genre written about and marketed towards women. Konchar Farr’s statement borrows in part from the famous first line of Jane Austen’s 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*, a narrative often cited as a predecessor of this contemporary genre (Ferriss and Young 5; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 4; Kiernan 207; Ryan, “Trivial or Commendable?” 77; Wells 48–49).¹ Close analysis of the female protagonists in my selected texts reveals their similarities to and differences from those of British and North American chick lit, and how they may be influenced by understandings of New Zealand history and culture, especially gendered stereotypes.

Commenting on New Zealand stereotypes, masculinities theorists Law, Campbell, and Schick suggest “there is no equivalent feminine myth, not even a term, to partner the ‘Kiwi Bloke’” (14). The use of the word “Kiwi” – the colloquial nickname for New Zealanders – as a descriptor implies this type pertains to men nationwide. There are some New Zealand female stereotypes, but they tend to be associated with specific places and characters rather than the country as a whole. Two such examples are Lynn of Tawa and Cheryl West, fictional female characters linked to the northern suburbs of Wellington and the western suburbs of Auckland respectively.² Meanwhile, “Merivale Mums” is a term given to affluent and allegedly

¹ The first line of *Pride and Prejudice* is: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1).

² Lynn of Tawa was a character created and performed by Ginette McDonald in the 1970s, “famous for her stereotypical lower-middle-class accent and grating vowels”

pretentious women of that particular Christchurch suburb.³ As indicated by the terms themselves, such examples are restricted to particular districts and are thus far less pervasive than the enduring myth of the “Kiwi Bloke”. Accordingly, it is evident that women’s identities in New Zealand have not been reduced to a single stereotype to the same degree as those of men. However, it is also clear that the prominence of the Kiwi Bloke figure adds to traditional assumptions that New Zealand identities are particularly associated with maleness. Jock Phillips (279), Claudia Bell (*Inventing New Zealand* 37), and Law, Campbell and Schick (14) are among the scholars who have recognised the predominance of masculinities in conceptions of New Zealand identity.

New Zealand chick lit is the product of two particular contexts. It is influenced by the established conventions of the genre as a whole and by popular understandings of New Zealand identities and culture. As such, the central characters in my selected novels share many traits with the protagonists of British and North American chick lit. Irrespective of their nationality, such novels are often based on the protagonists’

(Maclean). Cheryl West is a leading character from *Outrageous Fortune*, a popular New Zealand television show which screened from 2005-2010. Played by Robyn Malcolm, Cheryl is a female example of the “Westie” stereotype, and is described as a “leopard-print loving matriarch” (Croot).

³ The “Merivale Mum” stereotype is well recognised (within Christchurch at least). A satiric Facebook page titled “It’s a Full Time Job Being a Merivale Mum” regularly posts from the purported point of view of a Merivale mother, and includes in its “about” section: “Raise a glass for us mums of Merivale, if you marry money, you can live this fairytale”, perpetuating the myth that mothers in this part of Christchurch do not work in paid employment.

desire to find a suitable romantic partner – who they may or may not marry, or have children with. This strand of the narrative is balanced with the characters' other demands. These often include, but are not limited to their career, their friendships, and family life – which can involve their parent and sibling relationships as often as it does their own children, if indeed they have any (Cabot; Wells 49; Yardley 11). Consequently, chick lit protagonists have multiple priorities and spend much of the narrative overcoming a variety of obstacles in their quest to achieve their various goals. Recognised as such are their own insecurities (Umminger 240), circumstantial changes like redundancy or eviction (Ryan, “Trivial or Commendable?” 75; Yardley 14), and bad boyfriends (Smyczyńska 32; Yardley 13).

New Zealand protagonists face similar social and emotional issues to those of British and North American chick lit. For example, domestic violence has been addressed in many novels of the genre, such as Irish text *This Charming Man* (Keyes 2012) and New Zealand text *Barefoot* (Holman 2010). Issues of unexpected pregnancy are raised in English novel *The Reading Group* (Noble 2005) and in New Zealand texts *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* (Hawkins 2013) and *Barefoot* (Holman 2010). English text *I Don't Know How She Does It* (Pearson 2003) and the Penny Rushmore trilogy by New Zealand author Felicity Price (*Split Time* 2005; *A Sandwich Short Of A Picnic* 2008; *Head Over Heels* 2010) are among several chick lit novels that reflect the tension between motherhood and career ambition. The stress of caring for elderly parents, seriously ill, or even terminal family members has also been explored in novels such as *Me Before You* (Moyes 2012), and New Zealand text *Dinner at Rose's* (Hawkins 2012). *Dinner at Rose's* and another New Zealand novel, *A Jolt to the Heart* (Price 2014), each address bereavement and grief, as do Irish texts *Anybody Out There?* (Keyes 2006), and *P.S. I Love You* (Ahern 2004). Clearly, the

experiences featured in the above texts show that New Zealand chick lit protagonists frequently face the same challenges and share similar responsibilities as those of British and North American novels.

So how then, do my selected texts construct their protagonists differently? As in real life, New Zealand chick lit is populated by a variety of characters with different personalities and experiences, and so there is no singular, monolithic female identity in these novels. However, three commonalities emerge between the protagonists of my selected texts – their attitudes to beauty, chosen careers, and additional responsibilities – which set them apart from those of British and North American chick lit.

1.1 BEAUTY AND APPEARANCE

Within the small field of scholarship about chick lit, the genre's focus on appearance has been of prime consideration. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young argue that "chick lit's concern with shopping, fashion, and consumerism leads to an arguably obsessive focus on skin deep beauty" (11). In her essay "The Case for Chick lit in Academic Libraries", Davis-Kahl notes that the "intense focus on appearance, accessories and the body in chick lit is a source of discomfort for some" (19). She states that the genre's concentration on appearance is frequently read as a reinforcement of female insecurities and a celebration of the beauty industry. The aesthetics of chick lit novels themselves have also been discussed. Pink and pastel book-jackets featuring beauty and fashion imagery, such as cosmetics, stilettos and dresses have been read as a perpetuation of consumerism and commercial beauty ideals (Davis-Kahl 20; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 15; Whelehan 184). Chick lit protagonists' anxieties about their weight and physical appearance have also

been explored in academic scholarship (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 29, 59; Umminger 240), as has a perceived obsession with shopping (Ferriss and Young 10; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 50–51; Van Slooten 219). Furthermore, a collection of masters and doctoral theses has focused on the representations of, and recurring emphasis on, high maintenance beauty and appearance in British and North American chick lit novels. These include *Think Pink and High Heels: Women and Beauty as Represented in Chick Lit* (Kent), *From Chantilly Lace to Chanel: Commodity Worship in Chick Lit* (Ghosh), and *The Clothes Do Maketh the Woman: The Politics of Fashioning femininity in Contemporary American Chick Lit* (Arosteguy).⁴ Evidently, the glamorous representation of female characters' appearances has attracted a significant amount of academic attention.

As Wells argues, the representations of women's appearances in chick lit share one salient characteristic:

With beauty, chick–lit writers must toe a fine line. If the heroine is too stunning, readers may resent her; if she is too ordinary looking (let alone unattractive), she gives readers nothing to admire ... In being

⁴ Kent draws her analysis from a range of chick lit texts, including Weiner's *In her Shoes* (2002), Palmer's *Conversations with a Fat Girl* (2005), Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Blumenthal's *Fat Chance* (2005), and Green's *Jemima J* (1998).

Ghosh bases her research on a selection of texts, including Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2000), Sykes's *Bergdorf Blondes* (2004), and Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003). Arosteguy's work analyses a variety of texts including Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Blumenthal's *Fat Chance*, Frankel's *The Accidental Virgin* (2000), and Messina's *Fashionistas* (2003).

beautiful but not too beautiful, chick lit's heroines are the direct descendants of [Jane] Austen's. (59)

Accordingly, the depictions of protagonists' looks in British and North American chick lit varyingly emphasise their angst about their body or their love of fashion. For example, the protagonists in *Jemima J* (Green), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding), and *Last Chance Saloon* (Keyes 1999), all worry about their appearance, and are particularly anxious and neurotic about their weight. For instance, the opening lines of *Jemima J* are "God I wish I were thin. I wish I were thin, gorgeous, and could get any man I want" (Green 1). *Bridget Jones's Diary* begins with the protagonist's New Years resolutions, one of which is to "Reduce circumference of thighs by 3 inches" (Fielding 3). Likewise, in *Last Chance Saloon*, Tara worries about her weight: "When I'm nervous I want to eat, when I'm worried I want to eat ... My life is a NIGHTMARE" (Keyes 102). Meanwhile, the protagonists in *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Kinsella), *The Devil Wears Prada* (Weisberger), and *Sex in the City* (Bushnell), are obsessed with designer clothes and shoes, and all uphold high maintenance standards of conventional beauty. For example, in *Shopaholic to the Rescue*, Becky goes shopping: "I've just been into Armani and seen a lovely grey cashmere jacket which would look *stunning*" (Kinsella 67, italics in original). In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andrea wears high maintenance clothes: "a skintight pair of leather pants, open toe strappy sandals, and a blazer over a tank top" (Weisberger 325). And in *Sex and the City*, the characters favour designer labels: "I was stupidly wearing Manolo Blahnik spike heels instead of the more sensible Gucci ones" (Bushnell 51). Of the representation of women's appearances in typical British and North American chick lit, Umminger concludes that "looks are a form of currency that aid not only one's search for a mate but also one's ability to secure that

promotion, or get that next job, and become a fully realized human being” (240).

Consequently, the pressure to look slim and beautiful is a prominent issue for many protagonists in such novels.

In contrast, the New Zealand chick lit protagonists in my selected texts are much more relaxed and self-deprecating about their appearances. For example, in *Dinner at Rose's*, Jo explains:

In moments of wild optimism I hope I achieve a sort of Junoesque elegance; at other times I console myself with the thought that if people piss me off I can wrestle them to the ground and stomp on them until they beg for mercy. (27)

This comically emphasises Jo's strength, which she appreciates later in the novel when she is able to physically carry her honorary aunt Rose, who is dying of cancer: “Never have I been so grateful to be, after all, a strapping wench rather than a delicate wisp of a girl” (264). In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, the protagonist Helen is also modest about her looks, discussing her facial features in detail in this extract:

Round, pink cheeks- cute on a six-year old but less so when you're twenty-six. Freckles across nose, ditto. Skin otherwise good – family tradition states that Helen Has Lovely Skin. I've always suspected that family tradition states this mostly because I was quite overweight in my teens and my aunts wished to be encouraging. (23)

Similarly, in *Knotted* (Holman), the protagonist Danny Lawton is self-effacing about her fashion choices. While characters in British and North American chick lit often covet designer labels, Danny's style is very different:

Clothes didn't interest her much, and with money tight she bought most of her wardrobe from second hand shops. Each morning Danny

pulled on the first thing she found, adding more layers if the first choice wasn't warm enough. The results ranged from highly original to downright appalling. Today was downright appalling. (49-50)

These characters' attitudes to their appearances embody a familiar myth of New Zealand identity: to "be self-deprecating", the first characteristic noted by popular cultural commentator Rosemary Hepözden in her list "How to be mistaken for a Kiwi" (75). The prevalence of this trait in my selected texts is one of the ways New Zealand authors adapt the conventions of British and North American chick lit for a local readership. As such, it suggests that the New Zealand protagonists' comparatively less glamorous attitudes to their appearances appeals to the implied readers of these novels, and extends the opportunity for light-hearted romantic experiences to characters who do not obsess over looking beautiful.

The protagonists of my selected texts are also often depicted as being practical about their clothing choices. For example, Charlotte, the protagonist of *Blackpeak Station*, is immediately cast as such in the first chapter of the novel when she wears "filthy moleskins" (7), "gumboots" (8), and a "bush shirt" (9) while out lambing in the high country. Her wardrobe is full of dirty farm clothes and when one of her love interests, Rob, arrives at the station unexpectedly she struggles to find something appropriate to wear:

She rummaged frantically and without success for a clean pair of jeans. Settling on the least grubby pair, she drenched them with Andrea's Christmas perfume to hide the competing odours of dog and sheep – then, catching a whiff of herself, wished she hadn't. When she finally made her reappearance in the kitchen, it was in a pair of old tracksuit pants she'd found in Nick's room and a baby pink t-shirt. (38)

In *Dinner At Rose's*, Jo's attire is also portrayed as being sensible rather than stylish when she wears a "polar fleece vest" (258) on a cold night catching sheep in the rain. Wearing polar fleece – much less a polar fleece vest – is antithetical to the conventionally feminine fashion sense of typical British and North American chick lit protagonists. Such apparel instead demonstrates the particular characterisation of these New Zealand protagonists, and stresses the value of functionality over fashion.

The characters' engagement with personal grooming and beauty routines – or lack thereof – also differentiates my selected texts from conventional chick lit. In *Dinner at Rose's* it is evident that Jo is not wholly careless about how she looks: "fine," I said, tucking the phone between ear and shoulder so as to be able to file my nails while I talked" (30). However, at this moment she is multi-tasking at work, making it clear that a high maintenance beauty regime is not her main priority. Furthermore, as a physiotherapist she would not be able to have long fingernails, so this detail again highlights her practical sensibilities. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Helen often jokes she does not look her best because her job as a large animal vet frequently leaves her dirty: "I examined the fingernails of my right hand, which had a greenish tinge and would have been improved by a few minutes work with a nailbrush" (15). This is further highlighted in a comic exchange with Thomas, the receptionist at her work, when she jokingly asks him "are you saying I'm not (beautiful)?" He quips back "it might help if you washed the cow shit off your ear for a start" (11). Such relaxed attitudes to appearing dirty and dishevelled echoes the similar attitude of Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen). When Elizabeth walks three miles to visit her ill sister, Caroline Bingley is horrified to notice that Elizabeth's petticoat is "six inches deep in mud, I am absolutely certain" (82). Lizzie does not care whether she is dirty because visiting Jane is her priority. Crucially, in

Chocolate Cake for Breakfast, Helen's unfussy attitude to her appearance makes her more attractive to her love interest, Mark, who is impressed that: "You're really not the high-maintenance type, are you?" (96). These kinds of exchanges cast characters that are somewhat ambivalent about how they look as more desirable than those who are obsessed with their images. This is in sharp contrast to the concern expressed by some critics that British and North American texts depict an excessive focus on beauty and appearance as a means of attracting a mate.

The New Zealand protagonists' attitudes to personal presentation are further cast as ideal in contrast to other female characters. This is most noticeable in *Dinner at Rose's* through Jo's juxtaposition with Cilla, a rival for Matt's affections. Cilla is nicknamed "Farmer Barbie" (122), portraying her appearance as conventionally beautiful, but plastic and superficial. Hawkins describes Cilla's attire:

She was wearing a powder-blue shirt with the collar turned up and a pair of closefitting moleskin trousers, pearl drops in her ear and a quantity of very shiny lip gloss. Pointedly rural, prettily feminine, and faintly – or not so faintly – private school. (49).

Cilla's "closefitting" trousers suggest they she has chosen a flattering but restrictive cut over comfort and practicality, while her "private school" background is at odds with the egalitarian ideals of the New Zealand colony, which remain a prevalent part of the national mythology today.⁵ As such, this is yet another way that the established

⁵ Settlers aimed to establish New Zealand as a classless society, unlike the socially divided Britain many of them came from (Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* 12; Hansen 57). These early intentions evolved into a myth of New Zealand identity that "effectively hid inequities" (Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* 12), while discouraging self-importance and pretensions of grandeur.

formula of British and North American chick lit is fused with myths of New Zealand cultural identity in order to appeal to a particular readership, or “interpretive community”, to use Fish's term for this concept. Contrasting characters such as Cilla reinforce low-maintenance style as a preference of the protagonists and their love interests, and suggest that the implied readers of my selected texts are also likely to identify with this sensibility.

The characteristic rejection of conventionally feminine, glamorous beauty ideals in my selected texts is most acute in *Divine*. In this novel, Tara leaves her luxurious life on Auckland's North Shore for a muddier existence in a small town in rural Waikato. Her changing attitude towards her appearance mirrors this shift in her lifestyle. Different to the other protagonists in my selected texts, Tara is initially established as being image obsessed, and her fashionable clothes are cast as impractical for life on a farm. However, unlike Cilla in *Dinner at Rose's*, readers are encouraged to sympathise with Tara, because her husband has just ended their marriage. Nevertheless, Gil, Tara's new love interest, is at first disparaging towards her because of her appearance:

What idiot went out on a farm on a wet, muddy day wearing white clothes and high heel boots? He didn't rate her chances when it came to cleaning the mud and cowshit off her clothes and those boots. If ever there was a high-maintenance woman, Tara Whitehead was it.

(68)

As the narrative progresses, Tara adjusts to life on the farm and adapts her clothing choices to better suit her lifestyle, which now includes jobs that involve getting dirty. Gil observes the change in her appearance: “There she was again – the surfer girl, grubby, smiling, *sexy*” (198, *italics in original*). Evidently, Gil is more attracted to her

now that she is prepared to be “grubby” while working on the farm. By the end of the novel, Tara is capable of running the farm. Her clothing choices now reflect sensible rather than sartorial considerations: Gil notices her “come out of the round barn further up the race, wearing a thick, fleecy blue sweatshirt and blue jeans. He was glad she got the message that white jeans and farms don’t mix” (260). This demonstrates her newfound pragmatism, which is further emphasised later in the novel:

She wore the most disreputable pair of shorts ... jandals and a filthy pink singlet with a knot tied in one of the straps to keep it together. Her face was streaked with dirt and her loose hair was festooned with cobwebs. (327)

By this point in the narrative, she has learned that her appearance is not as important as being capable and hardworking. As such, Tara’s aesthetic transformation coincides with and complements her character development into an independent, practical farmer. In doing so, she exemplifies the sensibilities of the protagonists in my selected texts regarding their attitudes to their appearance, which are different from those found in typical British and North American chick lit.

Indeed, none of the protagonists in my selected texts put as much effort into looking good for a love interest as one of chick lit’s most famous characters. In *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, before a date with “wrong man” Daniel Cleaver, Bridget writes:

Completely exhausted by entire day of date-preparation. Being a woman is worse than being a farmer – there is so much harvesting and crop spraying to be done: legs to be waxed, underarms shaved, eyebrows plucked, feet pumiced, skin exfoliated and moisturized, spots

cleansed, roots dyed, eyelashes tinted, nails filed, cellulite massaged, stomach muscles exercised. (30)

Although this is a joke that mocks the artificial methods for pursuing conventionally feminine beauty, their comparison to farming is significant given that many of the protagonists in my sample of texts are actual farmers, or at least undertake farming-related duties. While Bridget is – albeit ironically – occupied with cultivating her personal appearance, the protagonists in my sample are more likely to be cultivating tangible, agricultural land, an enterprise long associated with myths of New Zealand cultural identity. As such, this further exemplifies how my selected texts adjust and revise conventions of British and North American chick lit in order to appeal to a different community of implied readers.

Crucially, however, although it is clear that their aesthetic appearance is not a priority, the protagonists in my selected texts retain the capacity to look fabulous, but only for special occasions. For example, in *Dinner at Rose's*, Jo's gets ready for a party, while still expressing her discomfort about beauty rituals:

I finished my mascara and frowned critically at my reflection. I'm a bit scared of makeup, which is a ridiculous thing for a grown woman to admit. I always worry that I will look as though I've tried too hard, and as a result I apply the stuff so sparingly I may as well not bother. But I thought of Chrissie with her enormous smoky eyes and dark spiky lashes, put my shoulders resolutely back and turned away from the mirror *without* rubbing my eyeliner off again with a flannel. (80-81)

In the epilogue of *Knotted* Danny goes to the Academy Awards as Ross's date. This is an opportunity for her to be truly glamorous at one of the world's most prestigious

awards ceremonies, celebrated as much for fashion as for filmmaking. Danny is depicted as looking good at this event:

Danny's taste in clothes hadn't improved. Ross had chosen her amber Marchesa gown, and had had topaz and diamond earrings shaped like Darth Vader made especially for her. Danny had added her own personal touch, painting a topaz-and-gold-coloured streak through her fringe. (365)⁶

In *Divine*, Tara also retains the ability to look magnificent when the occasion suits. At the end of the novel the community holds a Guy Fawkes celebration. To this event Tara wears “a lovely gauzy dress in pink and lavender ... her long, blonde hair trailing down her back” (350). None of these instances occur at the high point of the romantic plot, and in the cases of *Knotted* and *Divine*, the protagonists have already united with their ultimate love interest. As such, the characters' capacity to look beautiful is unrelated to their ability to attract a mate, appealing instead to the blend of contemporary women's realities and fantasies inherent to the chick lit genre. As such, my selected texts portray characters that dress up or dress down according to the occasion, suggesting that readers identify with both of these modes of personal presentation.

Yet, it remains clear that these characters are not always comfortable when attempt to look glamorous. In *Blackpeak Station* the core group of staff go to Christchurch for *Cup and Show Week*. Whilst there, Charlotte has to dress up for a day at the races. Notably, there is no shopping in preparation for this event. Instead she is given a bespoke designer suit dress to wear. “It was a short black coatdress with

⁶ *Marchesa* is an elite designer fashion label, particularly known for red carpet ball gowns. Darth Vader is an evil character from the Star Wars franchise of films.

a satin tuxedo collar. Turning to the mirror, she held it against herself – the wool was so fine it felt lighter than silk” (131). But, Charlotte also notes that “the new high heels her mother had made her buy to go with her Cup Day dress weren’t designed to cover that sort of distance. In fact, she really had to concentrate to walk in them at all” (138). Evidently, her preference is for comfort. Her uneasy relationship with fashion and beauty is further emphasised when she attends her brother Nick’s wedding to Flavia at the end of the novel: “She still wasn’t sure that all this smoky eye-shadow and pearly lipstick was really her” (300). The implication that Charlotte does not feel like herself when she wears such make-up is reinforced by Rob’s assertion: “you don’t look like you in that dress” and her quick response: “Want me to put some gumboots on?” (305). Significantly, this short exchange occurs at the highpoint of the romance plot, when Charlotte and Rob finally get together. Accordingly, it re-emphasises that protagonists unadorned by beauty products and accessories are more attractive, and perhaps more authentic, than those who have high-maintenance personal grooming routines. In their quest for love, what these characters look like is less important than their personalities, suggesting that the implied readers of these novels identify with and are enchanted by this possibility.

Although it is refreshing to read chick lit where the characters are not coveting the latest designer clothing, worrying about their weight, or spending copious amounts of money on their appearance, the New Zealand chick lit texts in this sample imply that an interest in fashion does not – or perhaps cannot – coexist with qualities of capability and practicality. This representation is at odds with the abilities and interests of some actual New Zealand women. In reality, clothing designers such as Dame Trelise Cooper, Kate Sylvester, Karen Walker, and Helen Cherry have forged impressive careers in fashion both locally and globally. Catherine de Groot and Sarah

Gibbs, who founded natural skincare company *Trilogy*, sell their products internationally and quadrupled their profits in the year between 2014-2015 (Meadows). So it is clear that real New Zealand women interested in fashion, beauty, and skincare are capable, of running successful businesses at least.

The differences between the representation of women's appearances in my selected New Zealand texts and those of British and North American chick lit are as much about what is excluded from the novels, as what is included. Notably, only Tara in *Divine* goes on any kind of clothes shopping spree, and by the end of the novel she has reassessed her priorities, and her wardrobe. While the protagonists in my selected texts largely reject conventionally feminine standards of beauty, there are a few New Zealand chick lit novels that eschew this tendency, such as Merryn Corcoran's *The Paris Inheritance* (2014), in which the protagonist moves to Paris and becomes a fashion designer. However, her designs are inspired by her childhood pastime of painting and decorating her gumboots (289), still grounding her in the spirit of practicality to some extent. Similarly, Felicity Price's *Penny Rushmore* trilogy is set in inner city New Zealand, and so this somewhat more cosmopolitan environment lessens the protagonist's need for practical clothing. Accordingly, different New Zealand authors adopt and adapt the conventions of British and North American chick lit in a variety of ways and to varying degrees. Nevertheless, it is clear that mythic icons and symbols of New Zealand cultural identity (like the gumboots in Corcoran's novel) remain a significant influence on their work.

The popularity of my selected texts suggests that readers identify with the ideals of practicality and capability, which are depicted as more important than the pursuit of glamour. This exemplifies one of chick lit's most significant elements: the requirement to reflect a fusion of contemporary women's realities and fantasies. This

dynamic operates in a few different ways. The inclusion of aspects designed to appear like “realities” (such as wearing polar fleece, becoming dirty after working on the farm, and looking apparently unglamorous most of the time) makes the “fantasy” elements of chick lit (like going to the Oscars in a designer gown and falling in love with Mr. Right) more believable, or at least more acceptable for readers. Conversely, such fantasies also make some of the more upsetting “realities” in chick lit more tolerable, which include divorce, terminal illness, and death. This blend ultimately facilitates light-hearted escapism for readers of chick lit, who are able to suspend their disbelief – at least while they are reading the novels.

Importantly, it is clear that British and North American chick lit is also popular among New Zealand readers, with novels by Jill Mansell, Jojo Moyes, and Danielle Steel appearing on bestsellers lists (“Nielsen Weekly Bestsellers List: For Week Ending 6 February”). Accordingly, it is the genre itself that holds the widest appeal for the New Zealand market. Nevertheless, due to the influence of mythologised aspects of New Zealand cultural identity, unlike typical British and North American texts, my selected texts promote characters that often resist idealised beauty standards in order to appeal to a different readership.

1.2 WORK

Another way my selected New Zealand chick lit texts differ from British and North American examples of the genre is through the representation of protagonists’ careers. Classic chick lit is recognised as typically depicting protagonists working in “Glam industries” (Yardley 8), as many texts focus on the career experiences of these characters to varying degrees. Media roles in print and television journalism, public relations, and fashion magazines are often featured as desirable occupations

(Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners” 33; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 31). This trend is seen in texts such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, where the protagonist works in publishing and then television (Fielding), and *Sex and the City*, in which Carrie works as a journalist (Bushnell). Likewise, in *Anybody Out There* the central character works in public relations for cosmetics companies (Keyes), and in *The Devil Wears Prada* Andrea works for a fictional fashion magazine (Weisberger). I contend that such representation of careers also stems from chick lit’s blend of the realities and fantasies of contemporary women. It is a fact of modern life that more women are embarking on careers, both by choice and due to financial necessity (Dugan; Gruslytė, Taujanskaitė, and Žemaitytė 767). For example, in New Zealand, “[i]n the last 20 years the labour force participation rate of women has increased from 54.5 percent (June 1994 year) to 63.3 percent (June 2014 year)” (Flynn and Harris). Chick lit reflects this reality by including protagonists’ careers in the narrative. However, the glamorous nature of British and North American protagonists’ careers can be read as an embellishment of this reality, imbuing their working lives with style. As such, this offers readers escapism into a kind of “realistic fantasy” where the necessity of work is acknowledged, but glamorised in order to make it seem more appealing.

It is worth noting that although British and North American protagonists often work in such apparently exciting industries, they are also often in junior positions (Yardley 11). A typical protagonist usually experiences a series of embarrassing incidents exposing their ineptitude before finally proving their abilities at the end of the novel. A well known example of this is in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* when Bridget exposes her bottom to the nation while broadcasting live from a fireman’s pole (222-223), before reasserting her professional competence by securing an exclusive

interview with the victor of a high profile court case (242). Chick lit protagonists' progression in their careers therefore coincides with and complements their character development as they move towards their happy ending – complete with both career success and romantic fulfilment. This enables readers to identify with the characters' struggles for success and recognition at work, which are comfortingly achieved by the end of these narratives.

It is also recognised that in classic chick lit, the protagonist often has a horrible boss (Hale 103; Yardley 11). In such texts, conflict between these characters frequently drives the career plotline included in most novels of the genre. An example of this is seen in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Weisberger), in which Andrea works as Junior Assistant to the ruthless editor of a highly successful fashion magazine. Nevertheless, chick lit scholars Gill and Herdieckerhoff note that the inclusion of protagonists' "dazzling career(s)" as part of a happy ending equates professional success with romantic happiness, and does not require female characters to sacrifice one for the other (496). Further studies of the representation of women at work in chick lit include "Long Suffering Professional Females: The case of Nanny Lit" (Hale), *Angels in the house or Girl Power: Working Women in Nineteenth Century Novels and Contemporary Chick Lit* (Fest), and *Heroines of the Office: Chick Lit's Representations of the Contemporary Woman at Work* (McWatters).⁷ The following

⁷ Hale's work compares the experiences of the protagonists in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) and Kraus and McLaughlin's *The Nanny Diaries* (2002). Fest's article also draws comparisons between Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) and Kraus and McLaughlin's *The Nanny Diaries* (2002), as well as between Richardson's novel sequence *Pilgrimage* (1915–1967) and Kinsella's *The Undomestic Goddess* (2005), and between Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) and Weisberger's *The Devil Wears*

analysis will explore the ways my selected texts conform and depart from the conventional representation of protagonists noted by scholarship so far.

Contrasting with British and North American chick lit, my selected New Zealand chick lit texts reject the characteristic glamour of working life typically attributed to the genre. While all of the protagonists in this sample have busy careers, their occupations are framed as far more humble and are often in caring professions. For instance, in *Dinner At Rose's* Jo is a physiotherapist, a physically demanding job that serves others. As such, she is portrayed as hardworking and motivated in her career. She says: "I'm good at my job, and I work reasonably hard to keep getting better" (14). Additionally, it is clear that Jo has to work to be able to afford the mortgage on her property (267). These details about Jo's career illustrate that she is dedicated to her job and motivated to support herself financially. *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* also represents its protagonist in a caring profession. Helen is a large-animal vet, an occupation that requires considerable physical strength, expertise, and a willingness to get dirty. In *Knotted*, Danny is a senior nurse, another profession outside those typically featured in British and North American chick lit. Her name badge lists her full title as "Daneka Lawton, Clinical Nurse Specialist, Emergency Department" (22). This is also a caring profession, seen in her compassion towards a patient's wife:

It was Danny who took Mrs Reid into the unit as her husband of sixty-five years was worked on by the re-suss team so that she could see that everything possible was being done for him. It was Danny who

Prada. McWatters analyses depictions of protagonists at work in a selection of novels, including Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*, Kellaway's *In Office Hours* (2010), and Clarke's *Because She Can* (2007).

thought to slip back the sheet from one of the old man's pale feet so his wife could stroke and touch him one last time while he was still warm and clinging to life. And it was Danny who sat with Mrs Reid, held her hand and passed her tissues while she waited for her son and daughter-in-law to arrive. (74-75)

Such careers, which varyingly involve caring for the injured, the sick, the dying, and the bereaved, are different from the glamorous occupations of the protagonists of British and North American chick lit, who are more likely to be issuing press releases. This departure shows how my selected New Zealand texts eschew the traditional careers featured in the chick lit genre, suggesting that the implied readers of these texts are more likely to appreciate or identify with these different professions.

Like British and North American chick lit, my selected texts represent work as a means of attaining both financial and emotional independence. Tara's development in *Divine* demonstrates this particularly well, while also drawing on myths of New Zealand cultural identity that idealise farming lifestyles, capability, and a willingness to work hard. Tara's career path is significantly different to the other protagonists in this sample. She begins the novel unemployed, having given up her degree years ago in order to be a stay-at-home mother to her now teenage daughter Jen, whilst being supported financially by her then husband Richard. When Tara and Jen move to a small town in rural Waikato in the wake of her marriage breakup, she realises: "I need a job" (76). When she is offered well-paid employment as a telephone sex worker, Tara decides to take it:

It would solve her money worries and set her well on the way towards a good house in her old stomping grounds Auckland. And she would have done it herself, without relying on a man. (176)

This stresses the importance she places on being able to support herself financially without assistance. However, Tara's calls with clients and their fetishes are fundamentally included as humorous escapades, such as when "Magic the horse" gets drunk on beer during her first session in a farcical episode (191-194).⁸ The comic nature of this job provides entertainment and fanciful escapism for readers.

The idea of work as a means to independence in this novel is further emphasised by Tara's work on the farm, which is much more significant than her job in telephone sex because it facilitates her character and relationship development. Her move to the country and her complete inexperience at farming functions as an opportunity for Gil, the male love interest in this novel, to teach her about it. Initially she hates rural life and wishes to return to Auckland (176), but with Gil's support, she changes her mind. As such, farm work brings the two of them together and Tara becomes more self-sufficient, seen in this conversation:

‘Do you need a hand to set up the electric fence?’ he asked gruffly.

‘No, I’m beginning to get the hang of it.’ (198)

Soon, Tara is mucking out paddocks, studying land management, fencing, and ultimately helping Gil with the milking when they eventually become a couple. On one particular occasion, she is unable to get the tractor working to muck out the land:

so Tara had no choice but to put on her floral gumboots and matching gardening gloves, take the wheelbarrow out into the paddocks, and do the job by hand. Some of the owners stopped to stare when they saw stuck-up Mrs Whitehead picking up horse manure, but nobody offered to help. It was back-breaking work ... Tara struggled on, with sweat

⁸ Magic is a wayward pony Tara is charged with taking care of on the farm.

dripping into her eyes and the muscles of her shoulders and back
screaming with the effort. (200)

This illustrates the dramatic change in Tara's sensibilities, from someone who impractically wears all white on a muddy farm to a woman unafraid to undertake some of the dirtiest and most challenging of jobs on her own. Accordingly, independence and capability are strongly cast as important attributes, implying that readers of these novels also value these qualities.

The depiction of protagonists' careers in my selected texts additionally emphasises these characters as hard working, in terms of physical strength and manual labour. This is clearly seen in the above description of Tara's work on the farm, and also in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, when Helen's commitment to her job frequently causes her pain. She is kicked in the face by a steer early in the novel, causing her eye to become bloodshot (10), and her arms ache: "the insides of my elbows were bruised purple from calving cows, which made me feel pleasantly stoic and hardworking" (56). Although she works in a caring profession it is clear that this is a challenging job, which emphasises her as tough, pragmatic, and dedicated. The novel also features graphic descriptions of veterinary procedures such as delivering stillborn animals: "I inserted a gloved and lubed fingertip gently into the little cat's vulva and met a nose, jammed tight against the pelvis" (7). Helen also has to deliver a heifer's stillborn calf in order to save its life. The procedure is arduous and challenging: "I had to cut off a front leg, and then lie on the concrete behind the heifer to work my fingers between the calf's ribs and pull out handfuls of decomposing internal organs. The smell was appalling" (35). The inclusion of these explicit details about her work reinforces Helen as capable, pragmatic, and certainly not squeamish. They markedly contrast to the challenges faced by protagonists of British and North

American texts at work, who are more likely to embarrass themselves professionally than perform complex veterinary procedures.

However, the occupations depicted in my selected texts are not just difficult and unglamorous because of their physical requirements, but also because of social issues they can involve, such as sexism. In *Blackpeak Station*, Charlotte works in the rural sector managing a high country sheep station. Despite his disinterest in taking over the farm, Charlotte's older brother Nick inherits the land after the death of their father purely on the basis that he is male (23). Initially, her desire to run the property herself is met with opposition, but Nick hires her, and ultimately she proves that she is capable of handling all aspects of the farming business, including preventing financial disaster, buying shares, employing staff, and saving it from property development. As the station manager, unlike many protagonists of British and North American chick lit, Charlotte is in a position of seniority at work. As such, Charlotte overcomes the scepticism of men about her ability to manage the property, seen in this conversation with Luke, who asks:

‘You and your brother running it now?’

‘Just me.’

‘Must be a big job.’

‘Not when you know what you’re doing.’ There had been a hint of disbelief in his voice, and Charlotte resented it. (114)

The novel further draws attention to attitudes about women in working in the high country when Charlotte observes: “to some, a woman in charge of a station was still a bit of a novelty” (76-77). The inclusion of these assumptions about women managing farms highlights chick lit's ability to address significant social issues, like the sexism faced by women at work. This problem is widespread and well recognised: the gender

pay gap between men and women doing the same work was 11.8% in New Zealand in 2015 (“Gender Pay Gap | Ministry for Women”). However, while British and North American chick lit may be concerned with women breaking through the glass ceiling of more corporate, glamorous industries, this New Zealand text emphasises the sexism faced by women working in the rural sector. This exemplifies one of the ways in which my selected texts blend conventional elements of the genre with myths about New Zealand as a rural, agricultural location (which will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Three).

Differing further from British and North American chick lit, the representation of women’s careers in my selected texts frequently features the protagonists in positions of authority at work, as seen in *Blackpeak Station* above. Likewise, in *Knotted*, it is clear that “[e]xperienced ED nurses with Danny’s seniority weren’t exactly thick on the ground” (74). In *Dinner at Rose’s*, instead of having an “evil boss” typical of overseas texts, Jo has to deal with Amber, an inept receptionist employee. The relationship between Amber and Jo is comic, focusing on Amber’s incompetence and Jo’s growing exasperation. Jo says in the novel: “Relations between the two of us had become somewhat tense today, after I’d suggested that more time doing work and less time bidding on clothes on TradeMe would be desirable” (46). This emphasises that Jo is in a position of authority over Amber, and is trying to convert her into a more productive employee. Despite Jo’s best intentions, she soon concludes that Amber:

had obviously been sent to me as a punishment for the sin of pride in my managerial skills. She drifted along in her own unhappy (albeit soggy) little world, utterly impervious to reprimand or threat or disappointment. (90)

Similarly, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* Helen also deals with an incompetent employee, Zoe, a vet nurse. Zoe's negligence in one operation on a dog is almost fatal when she nearly overdoses him with anaesthetic. When Helen alerts her to her failing, "Zoe jumped and dropped her cell phone into the pocket of her scrub top. 'What?'" (141). The comparative seniority and competence of the protagonists in my selected texts portrays a different kind of "career fantasy" than that typical of British and North American chick lit. There is no question of the characters' competence or work ethic, suggesting that the implied readers of these New Zealand novels identify with or aspire to such leadership positions.

However, like British and North American chick lit, my selected texts often emphasise the difficulty of maintaining a tolerable work/life balance. The recurrence of this issue in many novels implies that readers widely identify with and recognise this challenge. In *Knotted*, Danny's advanced nursing expertise means she is often overworked and stressed, leading to a conflict between her priorities at home and at work. Her long hours exacerbate this sense of imbalance: "Twelve-hour shifts at the hospital meant time for housework was at a premium" (70), and separate her from her young niece and nephew, of whom she is a legal guardian. Danny manages to achieve a sense of equilibrium, but only once she has united with Ross and they have agreed to co-parent their niece and nephew. This aligns with the conventions of the genre, which often depicts protagonists' eventual contentment with their professional and family responsibilities as coinciding with the fulfilment of their romantic lives in a heterosexual long term relationship. Consequently, many chick lit novels seem to suggest that a balance between work and family life is only possible with support from a loving partner. Protagonists that begin the narrative as single parents like Danny in this novel or Tara in *Divine*, are inevitably paired up with a male love

interest by the end. As such, New Zealand chick lit reinforces the nuclear family unit as optimal, ideally with an extended family able to provide additional support and assistance as needed. This does not exactly undermine the protagonists' attributes of independence, practicality, and capability, because it is clear these novels portray such characteristics as fundamental to attracting a romantic partner. However, it does perpetuate the fantasy that everyday stress and challenges – at work and at home – are resolved by romance, which no doubt appeals to the implied readers of the genre.

Of my selected texts, the particular tension between motherhood and career ambitions is most acutely developed in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, when Helen becomes unexpectedly pregnant during the novel. This conflict is an issue emerging in British and North American chick lit, as discussed by Hewett in her article “You Are Not Alone: The Personal, the Political, and the “New” Mommy Lit”.⁹ In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Helen worries about the impact of her pregnancy on her professional aspirations: “I didn’t want to have a baby. I wanted to be a good dairy vet, the one farmers wanted to see rather than the one they settled for if Nick or Anita was unavailable” (129). She also stresses that “[r]eproducing had *not* featured in my short-to medium-term career plans” (130). After considering the implications of her decision, Helen goes ahead with the pregnancy and takes leave from her job. However, the epilogue includes details of her decision to work part time after the birth of her daughter: “I work two days a week at a small animal practice in Mount Wellington, dropping Meg at day care on the way. It’s a nice job, although short on cows, and it keeps my hand in” (359). Helen’s determination to return to work after

⁹ Hewett identifies Pearson’s *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, Green’s *Babyville* (2003), and Wolf’s *Diary of a Mad Mom-to-Be* (2003) as chick lit novels reflecting this tension (119).

the birth of her baby is not due to financial necessity, because her partner Mark is a professional sportsperson who could easily afford to support her and their daughter. As such, the retention of some professional and financial independence is framed as desirable. However Helen's choice to "keep her hand in" illustrates the pressure on working mothers to return to their jobs sooner rather than later, so that their careers may still advance. Arguably, the fantasy in this instance – the apparently blissful combination of motherhood with a supportive partner and well-remunerated part time work – is a comparatively realistic one. Yet, it remains a fantasy nevertheless, and one that is not possible for many real women.

The particular focus on caring roles in my selected texts can be read as conservative because, as Milestone and Meyer argue, caring behaviours and activities are conventionally feminine (20). It is possible that such jobs make it more plausible for readers to envisage the kind of "realistic fantasy" where it is possible to combine work (which is possibly part time, though still meaningful, authoritative, and remunerative) with romance and family life. Careers in non-caring "glam industries" are perhaps less compatible with an imagined work/life balance. The relative lack of glamour in my selected texts – both in terms of the protagonists' appearances and their careers – aligns with New Zealanders' mythologised "general lack of pretension", a quality identified by Hepözden as a key marker of national character (49). As such, this is another way that representations of women's careers typical of the genre are adapted for a readership that is more likely to identify with these characters and their comparatively more "worthwhile" caring occupations. In her discussion of typical chick lit, Yardley argues that the professions favoured by protagonists are "the sort of positions that readers would love to experience vicariously" (11). This suggests that conversely, the implied readers of my selected

New Zealand texts are likely to find the depiction of characters working in highly skilled, senior caring professions more appealing than those in low ranking jobs in glamorous professions – at least while they are reading the novel. As such, it is clear that this particular interpretive community has its own set of realities and fantasies, drawn from the dual influences of the chick lit genre and mythologised aspects of New Zealand cultural identity.

1.3 MULTIPLE RESPONSIBILITIES

Another way my selected novels differ from British and North American chick lit is through the protagonists' multiple responsibilities and activities. The genre has been associated with the perpetuation of a gendered division of labour (Stone 157).

Feminist critic Alison Stone explains divisions of labour as the result of an assumption that women should undertake particular duties, such as childcare and nursing, while men should do more physical duties, such as manual labour like building and farming. Stone suggests that in order to encourage women into fulfilling these particular roles, objects like high heels, make up, magazines and chick lit novels are “gender-coded.” She elaborates that such products are “designed for and targeted at women under the assumption that they should be doing these [gendered] activities” (157). Stone’s argument is problematic – not least because British and North American chick lit texts vary in their representation of women’s activities. Certainly, some texts do seem to reflect her understanding of “gender-coded” activities, such as *Me Before You* (Moyes), in which Lou works as a carer to a tetraplegic man, and *I Don’t Know How She Does It* (Pearson), in which Kate juggles her career in finance with the demands of motherhood before ultimately leaving her job in order to care for her children full time. However, others do not, including Marian Keyes’s *The Other*

Side of the Story (2001), in which publishing agent Jojo has a doomed affair with her boss before finally ending the relationship and resigning to start her own business, bringing many of her already signed authors to her new agency. The central characters in Kathy Lette's *Courting Trouble* (2014) work in an all-female law firm. In any case, I am reluctant to condemn chick lit's representation of women's roles and responsibilities when there can be no definitive list of what women do, or should be doing. Despite social advances, extensive research confirms that women still undertake the "lion's share of housework" (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 767). As such, the criticism of the genre for its depiction of women cooking, cleaning, and caring for others disregards the aforementioned key feature of chick lit: the reflection of the realities and fantasies of contemporary women – though of course the inclusion of protagonists' domestic responsibilities is less fanciful and more realistic. That aside, my selected New Zealand texts pointedly feature protagonists undertaking a wide range of activities and duties, encompassing domestic and caring roles, but also manual labour.

Like some British and North American chick lit, my selected texts include the protagonists' engagement with conventionally feminine domestic tasks, although they particularly emphasise the characters' frustration and impatience with these responsibilities. For example, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* (Hawkins), Helen undertakes a range of different duties in addition to her career as a large-animal vet. The opening sentence of the novel depicts her cleaning her bathroom while she is "on call" (1) for work: "[w]hen the phone rang on Saturday night I was on my knees in the shower, scrubbing grimly at a mould stalactite I had just discovered lurking under the shelf that holds the soap" (1). This immediately places Helen in a housekeeping role. However, the fact that she is cleaning a "mould stalactite" suggests this is not an

activity she does particularly often, given that it must have been left undisturbed for some time in order to grow. That she is cleaning while on call for her job emphasises the multiple demands on her time, evoking the sense that her responsibilities are never ending. Helen's domestic duties are further evident when she vacuums her living room in preparation for a visit from Mark:

The vacuum cleaner bag was full, and burst as I removed it from the machine. This was not entirely a surprise, since every time the vacuum cleaner had stopped sucking in the last five months I'd emptied the bag into the rubbish bin with a fork, reflecting that I really must put vacuum cleaner bags on my shopping list. (23)

This suggests vacuuming is not a high priority for Helen, and highlights her frustrations with housework. That this happens just before her love interest, Mark, is due to arrive has a comic effect, because readers are likely to recognise the stress of tidying a messy house when guests are imminent and identify with this common experience. In *Dinner at Rose's*, Jo also participates in domestic cleaning jobs: "Putting down my block of steel wool I looked over the oven rack I'd been scrubbing. I couldn't discern any improvement at all" (103). This alludes to a sense of dissatisfaction with housework, suggesting that Jo's efforts to clean the oven are wasted. Moreover, it reflects a resentment towards chores that are conventionally assigned to women. The apparent futility of such tasks contrasts with the protagonists' other non-domestic duties and enhances the realism component of the "realistic fantasies" constructed to appeal to readers of chick lit, in which the protagonists are obliged to clean the house as well as fulfil their more meaningful or satisfying responsibilities.

The protagonists in my selected texts also take on non-domestic manual labour and responsibilities that are not conventionally feminine. In *Dinner at Rose's*, as well as working at the physio and looking after the house for Rose, Jo is portrayed as doing manual jobs on the farm. She helps Matt with the milking (20), and even takes over the coordination of the farm by managing Andy and Scotty while Matt is injured in hospital (368). This reinforces her pragmatism and ability to do whatever is most urgent. The most notable episode relating to the gendered division of labour in *Dinner at Rose's* is when Jo shears Rose's overgrown pet sheep. Dialogue between Jo and Matt reveals their resolution to share the job in future, and begins when Matt asks her:

‘What have you been up to today?’

‘I’ve been highly productive,’ I said. ‘I’ve found somewhere to live and shorn the two most disgusting sheep on the planet.’

‘Mildred and Edwin? I’ve been putting that off for months.’

‘I hate to break it to you, but you’re doing it next time. It nearly killed me.’ (20)

This stresses that Jo is quite capable of getting on and doing the shearing job that Matt has been procrastinating doing. The tone of this dialogue is light-hearted and funny, and their shared sense of humour emphasises their compatibility and romantic potential. In *Knotted*, Danny also manages a range of duties and responsibilities. Between her busy career, and her role as the sole guardian of her young niece and nephew, maintaining the house has been relegated to the bottom of her to do list. However, Danny is still depicted as being capable of small-scale home repairs. For example, the front door is warped and she needs to fix it:

[S]he kept meaning to borrow a wood-planer from Deryl’s husband, Lloyd, but never seemed to get around to it, just as she never seemed

to get around to fixing the toilet. It had to be flushed by pulling on a shoelace. Thanks to her father, Danny could repair almost anything.

(52)

When Ross later hires a plumber to replace the toilet while she is working a weekend shift at the hospital, Danny is grateful but insists: “It’s just I could have fixed it myself” (121). Evidently, pragmatism and independence are idealised characteristics assigned to these protagonists in order to appeal to readers.

The emphasis on these traits reflects the mythologised New Zealand characteristic of “DIY: Do It Yourself” (Hepözden 77), which remains prolific and recognisable in New Zealand media. For example, a *Mitre 10* television advertisement distinguishes explicitly between the “Do-It-Yourself Type” of New Zealand male and the “Pay someone else to do it type” of New Zealand male stating of the latter, “You don’t wanna be this type” (FCB New Zealand). As such, this advertisement simultaneously idealises DIY abilities and associates them with masculinity. The association between New Zealanders and DIY relates to the “no. 8 wire” myth, which is “a reference to a gauge of fencing wire that has been adapted for countless other uses in New Zealand farms, factories and homes” (Derby). Mark Derby explains that historic New Zealand inventions have led to the popular acceptance and idealisation of an imagined “culture of invention” and “Kiwi Ingenuity”. My selected texts clearly extend these conventionally masculine activities to female protagonists, who are cast as more appealing because of their capability. As such, this myth of New Zealand identity influences the modification of typical British and North American chick lit for a local readership.

Perhaps most significantly, my selected texts highlight that the protagonists’ responsibilities are numerous and emphasise the resulting stress that arises from

blending the demands of their careers, romantic desires, and their families. As mentioned in the previous section, in *Knotted*, it is only after Danny unites romantically with Ross, gains additional support from his extended Irish/Italian/American family, and gets her own extended family's assistance by reconnecting with her maternal Māori grandparents, that Danny finds her happy ending: "After years of being alone, Danny had family in Ireland, Italy, America and Rotorua" (365). In *Divine*, the epilogue reveals that after she moved in with Gil, Tara decided to return to university to complete the degree she abandoned after she became pregnant with Jen many years ago: "members of the Sorensen, Whitehead and Kemp families sat in the audience ... to watch Tara receive her degree" (362). The conclusion of the novel also highlights the multiple responsibilities she handled while she completed her studies, taking on extra duties: "Tara ended up being a lot better around the farm than [Gil] would have guessed, and was soon a dab hand at milking, drenching and driving the tractor" (365). It is further clear that Tara has balanced this with her responsibilities as a parent, not just to her teenage daughter, but also to her new baby son Zach: "an unplanned little hiccup ... who had just turned one" at her graduation ceremony (362). This is in sharp contrast with her single responsibility at the beginning of the novel, which was as Jen's parent. While it is clear that by the end of the narrative Tara has become more independent and capable, her ability to meet the many demands on her time has coincided with her romantic union with Gil. Likewise, by the end of *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Helen has given birth to her daughter and returned to work part time, dividing her time between child rearing, housekeeping, and working (359). Accordingly, the happy endings of these selected New Zealand chick lit novels comes when the protagonists are able to balance the various demands on their time as well as secure a committed, heterosexual, romantic

relationship. This reflects the genre's fusion of contemporary women's realities and fantasies, giving readers temporary access to a world where both romantic and stressful encounters are resolved in a happy ending.

The family responsibilities included in my selected texts are not just limited to childcare, but also extends to the care of sick family members. In *Dinner at Rose's*, the building sense of Jo as a busy character who does everything from running a physio practice, to domestic housework and physical farm labour, comes to a head through her role as Rose's carer. Jo moves in to look after Rose, who has advancing breast cancer. As Rose's condition deteriorates, the pressure on Jo to manage all of her responsibilities while under the emotional stress of Rose's terminal diagnosis increases. This pressure reaches its peak when Jo has to spend an unexpected evening lambing and is late home. She arrives to find Rose has soiled herself in bed because she was too ill to get up by herself. Jo describes the scene sadly, "The sheer awfulness of Auntie Rose, that epitome of cleanliness and hygiene, having to lie there helpless in a puddle of crap with nobody there to help her was almost too much to bear" (263). Stoically, Jo carries her to the shower, washes her and strips the bed:

Then I propped the poor woman up against the bathroom sink to dry and dress her, picked her up and carried her back to bed. Never have I been so grateful to be, after all, a strapping wench rather than a delicate wisp of a girl. (264)

This brings visibility to the difficulties of caring for the sick, which is developed further as the narrative progresses. Once Rose is clean and safely taken care of, Jo expresses how exhausted she is, while feeling helpless to change anything about her circumstances:

when you're overcome with lethargy you just have to do something. And then the next thing, and the next, and eventually, although you'd have sworn you were far too tired and depressed to accomplish anything, you're finished. I turned on the tap above the big concrete sink by the back door and began to scrub the sheets and blankets. (264-265)

Accordingly, despite her fatigue, Jo sacrifices her own needs to meet the needs of others. Crucially, there is never any doubt in Jo's mind that she should not – or could not – do any of these tasks. Because she loves Rose, there is no question that Jo will care for her, no matter what she has to do. Although this role is conventionally feminine and does not challenge gendered assumptions, it remains significant because it brings exposure to distinctly unglamorous and difficult caring responsibilities. As such, this fulfils the “reality” component of chick lit, appealing to readers who are likely to identify and/or sympathise with these experiences.

The intersection and overlapping of the protagonists' multiple responsibilities is also emphasised in my selected texts. This is most acute in *Blackpeak Station*, where the delineation between Charlotte's career and her other duties is blurred because her role as the station manager means she lives and works on the property alongside all of the staff. She oversees every aspect of the business and almost all of her responsibilities are in service to the station, which is both her home and her workplace. Certainly, like the other protagonists in my sample she undertakes manual tasks, such as lambing (7) and mustering (80), which are unlikely to be found in the pages of British and North American chick lit novels. However, Charlotte employs the head shepherd's wife Kath as a housekeeper, whose job is to cook for all of the staff (36), and so Charlotte's domestic duties are minimised. Furthermore, she does

not have children or any other dependents that require her care, possibly because she is younger than the other protagonists in this sample. Instead, this novel concentrates more on whether she is able to forge a successful career in farming on an isolated property as well as enjoy a committed romantic relationship. The question posed on the novel's cover is explicit about this perceived clash of priorities: "Can she have the man *and* the high country station?" (Ford, *Blackpeak Station*, Cover). Ultimately, when Rob relinquishes his own career and moves to the station, the answer is emphatically "yes". This indicates that although Charlotte's duties and responsibilities are primarily to the station, the novel addresses the issue of multiple priorities and whether it is possible to "have it all". In doing so, this novel also creates a somewhat "realistic fantasy" in order to appeal to the implied readers of these texts.

The emphasis on the multiple pressures faced by the protagonists of these novels reflects one of the sites of intersection between feminist and postfeminist discourses within the genre. Chick lit has been widely associated with postfeminism (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*; Adriaens and Van Bauwel; Arthurs; Konchar Farr), because it features protagonists who have undoubtedly benefited from the women's movement but are not actively engaged with seeking further equality, and who perhaps associate feminism with being "dowdy, hectoring, or shrill" (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 168). However, Harzewski convincingly argues that chick lit also draws from "certain strands" of feminism, particularly liberal feminism, which is associated with the power of individual women to make their own choices. She argues: "the genre complicates liberal feminism's advocacy of personal choice, which presents a mixed blessing. Protagonists have the right to choose, but now the problem is too many choices" (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 75). Chick lit's inclusion of protagonists' multiple responsibilities indicates the variety of options and

choices available to these characters. Yet it also shows that the management of these various demands can feel overwhelming, and as such, chick lit presents “a fictional exploration of the pressures of choosing wisely” (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 170). This is significant because chick lit novels seem to promote the same choices in the vast majority of texts: heterosexual relationships, busy careers, and often motherhood. Although this lack of variety is indicative of a conventional approach to women’s lives and occupations, the popularity of these “realistic fantasy” narratives nevertheless implies that readers of chick lit enjoy these particular depictions of women’s lives, however closely they resemble their own.

As established, the portrayal of the protagonists in my selected texts is likely to be influenced by certain popular conceptions of New Zealand identity and culture which are prominent in the national mainstream media, such as the protagonists’ engagement with DIY discussed above. A further local cultural dynamic influences the representation of women in my selected texts, relating both to their appearances and their responsibilities. Dr. Misha Kavka (Associate Dean of Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of Auckland), in an interview with *Your Weekend* for an article about the “ideal” New Zealand woman, explains that New Zealand women have been previously mythologised as being:

Practical and close to nature, not giving in to getting dolled up and self-ornamentation. There used to be this understanding of the New Zealand woman as being very pragmatic and getting things done, cutting through things and not being interested in the sort of femininity [that is] for show. (Yates 8)

Crucially, she argues that the globalisation of media and popular culture, particularly the arrival of ever more television and films produced overseas renders this

representation of New Zealand women as less relevant in contemporary society (8). However as demonstrated, my selected chick lit texts reaffirm and romanticise this impression of New Zealand women as pragmatic through the depiction of protagonists' attitudes towards their appearance, career choices and additional responsibilities. The popularity of these novels suggests there is an appetite for this ideal among the implied readers of New Zealand chick lit. This is perhaps because the highly competent protagonists of these novels are unlike those of British and North American chick lit, and present an alternative to characters like Bridget Jones, who has been condemned by some as "man-crazed" and "foolish" (Kuczynski).

This evidently enduring understanding of women's identities in New Zealand is also noted by Hepözden, who writes in her list "How to be mistaken for a Kiwi": "Don't be a girl. Harden up. Understand that blokey attitudes are perfectly acceptable – in women as well as in men" (76). Similarly, when advertising agency DraftFCB (now simply FCB) released a list of characteristics they draw on to create advertisements and sell products in a New Zealand market, media outlets ran coverage on the nationalistic marketing strategies that support Hepözden's assertion that New Zealanders seek to avoid being too "girly". In response, Fairfax Media's online news website, *Stuff*, ran an article claiming that in New Zealand "many women identify strongly with a masculine culture" (Mace), while *Onlifemag* published a piece which claims "Masculinity of expression" as a particular trait of New Zealand men and women. It further states that "New Zealanders expect to be able to do manual tasks to a level of proficiency – women as well as men – and admire such capability in others." ("Seven Defining Characteristics of Being a 'Kiwi' AKA New Zealander"). As such, it is clear that displays of conventional femininity are often perceived as antithetical to "New Zealandness", and New Zealand chick lit reinforces

this to some degree. This further demonstrates how, in my selected texts, myths of New Zealand cultural identity are hybridised with the conventions of British and North American chick lit in order to appeal to the implied fantasies of a New Zealand readership.

The emphasis on women's enthusiasm and ability to undertake manual tasks as well as domestic duties, especially in farming situations, also reflects the desired characteristics of working class young women who migrated from the United Kingdom to New Zealand between the 1840s and 1880s: "What was wanted was a class of 'really useful' women" (Macdonald 34), that "did not flinch at hard work and who lacked pretension" (Macdonald 103). Though the primary duties of women at that time were domestic, it is acknowledged that farmers who had wives and children to help them with farm work, such as feeding chickens, calves, pigs, and milking cows, were more successful than bachelors (Philips and Dewson). Notable individuals also became fully invested in the financial running of the farm and the daily handling of stock. One such woman is Jane Deans, who arrived in Lyttelton in 1853, living at her Riccarton farm until her death in 1911. Widowed with an infant son, she chose to remain on the family farm and manage it until her son was old enough to do so himself. She sought expert advice, and "became a good judge of stock, especially horses and cattle" ("The Pioneering Deans Family - Christchurch City Libraries"). The influence of the legacy of these pioneering women on the protagonists of New Zealand chick lit is such that *Divine* (Holman) draws an explicit connection between its central character Tara, and her ancestor Sarah Whitehead "boiling a billy of water over a campfire almost a hundred and fifty years earlier" (Holman, *Divine* 76) in the same place Tara is standing by the river. This draws a parallel between Sarah's experience of settling the land and Tara's experience of learning how to farm it.

Similarly, Felicity Price's New Zealand chick lit novel *Split Time* (a text that sits outside the sample chosen for this thesis, but which demonstrates many of the same tendencies), draws a connection between the novel's protagonist Penny Rushmore and her great grandmother Annie Jane, who was active in the suffragette movement to secure New Zealand women the right to vote in the general election. A series of Annie Jane's letters are included throughout the novel, through which Penny learns that she faced the "same sort of pressures and problems that we do today. Annie Jane's days were as rushed as mine ... she too had no time for herself" (123). This explicitly draws links between contemporary protagonists of New Zealand chick lit and female characters of the past, highlighting in particular their shared sense of stress over the handling of their numerous duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, even as it celebrates feminist achievements such as women's right to vote, it also perpetuates the postfeminist sensibility that in spite of this, women's lives are not necessarily easier now than in the past.

As established, the protagonists' attitudes towards their appearances, their particular careers, and their multiple responsibilities in my selected novels casts them as practical, capable and independent. However, like British and North American chick lit, these texts also reinforce heterosexual long-term relationships and the nuclear family unit as ideal (though Danny in *Knotted* has the additional support of extended family). As such, there seems to be a contradiction between the protagonists' strong sense of independence and their quest for a partner. As Harzewski observes, the popularity of chick lit indicates that "feminism's gains ... have not abated the desire for romance" (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 180). This is exemplified by the protagonists' "tug-of-war between conventional heterosexuality and autonomy" (186). Chick lit narratives reassure readers that it is possible to be in a

committed long-term relationship while retaining qualities of independence and autonomy. In New Zealand chick lit, this tension is addressed most explicitly in *Divine* (Holman):

Tara wasn't lying when she said she didn't need Gil. The past few months had shown her she was quite capable of standing on her own two feet. She *wanted* Gil. That was the difference. (307-308, italics the author's own).

The coexistence of self-reliant and romantic discourses demonstrates that these desires are not mutually exclusive as long as protagonists meet their “Mr. Right” (not just any man), who enables them to retain their independence. Accordingly, the blend of realism with fantasy in these novels also depends on the characterisation of the male love interests, and thus on the versions of New Zealand masculinity depicted in these texts. The qualities of these love interests are the focus of the next chapter. These fictional, yet satisfying relationships are balanced with the protagonists' equally significant characteristics of pragmatism, practicality, and capability. As such, these novels reflect a fusion of women's realities and fantasies in narratives where female characters' multiple responsibilities and desires are all fulfilled.

CHAPTER TWO: THE REPRESENTATION OF MEN

“Mr. Rights”, “Mr. Wrongs”, “Gay-Best-Friends”, and – in the words of Bridget Jones – “Emotional Fuckwits”, have each become recognisable chick lit stock characters (Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners” 37; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 33; Fielding 33). Existing scholarship about British and North American novels largely focuses on the depiction of female characters’ lives, with comparatively little attention given to the way male characters are portrayed. Nevertheless, as critic Amy Burns notes:

Since these are such popular texts, it is imperative to examine chick texts in order to establish how masculinity is constructed here, and to explore which masculinities and representations are favoured and used repeatedly. (2)

Of the academic writing on the subject, Katarzyna Smoczyńska's concept of the “implied Right Men” (32) is particularly useful. She uses this term to describe the male love interests in chick lit who are depicted as ideal partners for the various protagonists. By the conclusion of the narrative these characters are paired up in a presumably long-term romantic relationship. I contend that the “Right Men” featured in my selected New Zealand texts embody a unique, particular blend of characteristics. In these novels, popular understandings of masculinities in New Zealand are fused with many of the features of love interests in British and North American examples of the genre. Examples of more romantic chick lit love interests in overseas chick lit include Billy, from Fletcher's *Billy and Me* (2012), who sets up a picnic in the woods with fairy lights and baked goods for his first date with the protagonist (76-77), and Aidan, from Keyes's *Anybody Out There?*, who ardently tells

the protagonist he loves her sixty times a day (576). Such grand gestures are rare in New Zealand chick lit, as the following analysis will demonstrate.

Of particular interest is how the romantic conventions of the genre are hybridised with the well-recognised trope of the “Kiwi Bloke”, a mythologised figure of New Zealand masculinity. Cultural theorists Law, Campbell, and Schick define this figure in their introduction to *Masculinities in Aotearoa/New Zealand*:

The ‘Typical Kiwi bloke’ is apparently passionate about rugby and is a suspected gumboot wearer (when not wearing footy boots). He drinks large quantities of beer and can fix anything with a roll of number eight fencing wire. He is a good keen man who looks out for his mates, a rough diamond who is at his best when faced with physical adversity or war, but who does not easily display his emotions. (14)

Being a “suspected gumboot wearer” refers to the water and mud proof boots often associated with rural workers in New Zealand (Labrum). Gumboots were proclaimed as ideal footwear in farming character Fred Dagg’s “The Gumboot Song”, written and performed by comedian John Clarke in the 1970s. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the ability to fix something with “number eight wire” is a myth that stems from many inventions created by New Zealanders, which have been idealised as examples of “kiwi ingenuity” (Derby). In the case of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype, a select few values (or virtues) of pioneer settlers, such as self-sufficiency and practicality, are mythologised and become the whole story. This masks many of the other factors relating to the settlement, like the confiscation of Māori land, environmental modification, exploitation of animals, and political favouritism that enabled farmers to prosper. As Barthes explains, myth “abolishes the complexity of human acts” and “presents a world which is without contradictions” where “things

appear to mean something by themselves” (*Mythologies* 156). Close analysis of my selected texts reveals the ways the familiar New Zealand myth of the Kiwi Bloke is adapted and modified to satisfy the romantic narratives of chick lit.

This myth of New Zealand masculinity is widely recognised by scholars (Phillips; Law, Campbell, and Schick 14; Worth, Paris, and Allen 13; Bannister; Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* 163–165), and is repeatedly reproduced in mainstream media. The Kiwi Bloke stereotype can be found in numerous advertisements on New Zealand television, such as those for Mitre 10 (a hardware store), Speights (a beer brand), and the Isuzu D Max ute. It is likewise present in many television shows and films such as the featured farmers on *Country Calendar*, the comic sketches of Fred Dagg, and most recently the character Uncle Hec in Taika Waititi’s *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, a 2016 film based on Barry Crump’s book *Wild Pork and Watercress* (1986).

Not only found in popular media and culture, there is extant academic commentary about the Kiwi Bloke with respect to New Zealand literature. In *A Man’s Country?*, Phillips identifies the emergence of the New Zealand “traditional male stereotype” (279) with reference to a number of New Zealand novels, including Mulgan’s *Man Alone* (1939) and the short stories of Frank Sargeson (252). Jensen refrains from using the specific term “Kiwi Bloke”, but he nevertheless argues that New Zealand literature “has been heavily shaped by a masculine tradition” (169) which is characterised by several of the attributes associated with the Kiwi Bloke: “practical and manual work, sport (especially rugby), drinking and war” (19-49). This myth of New Zealand masculinity is also discussed by Alastair Fox (12) and Stuart Murray, who explores the prominence of and the tensions within what he calls the “Truly Strong Man” identity in New Zealand literature (153). My selected chick lit texts reveal a development in the conception and representation of this male

stereotype, constructed by female authors for the entertainment of a predominantly female readership.

The traits of the central love interests in my selected texts and their similarities to the Kiwi Bloke stereotype makes these characters recognisable to audiences familiar with this myth of New Zealand masculinity. However, this poses a problem. The love interests' adherence to this well-known but one-dimensional type risks rendering them as unromantic in a genre dependent on readers' engagement with the love story. Accordingly, as I will show below, this characterisation has to be tempered by the conventions of the chick lit genre as a whole in a way that portrays these love interests as desirable partners for the protagonists. The depiction of the other male characters featured in my selected texts, namely the protagonists' friends and ex-partners, is significant in this respect. Their characterisation contrasts with that of the central love interests who, as a result, are affirmed as the right men for the protagonists.

2.1 FARMERS, ALL BLACKS, AND BEER

The particular careers of the love interests in my selected texts are often very different from those of British and North American chick lit, who are frequently depicted in sophisticated occupations. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Mark Darcy is an international human rights lawyer, and in *Sushi for Beginners* (Keyes 2000), Jack Devine is the managing director of a media company that publishes a suite of magazines. In contrast, the love interests in my selected texts often favour rural occupations and lifestyles. In *Dinner at Rose's*, the central love interest Matt King is a Pākehā dairy farmer. He lists the various challenges of this occupation on one particular day: "Two heifers with mastitis, the met weather reckons we'll get a hundred mil of rain

overnight, lost a silage bale through a fence ... oh and the pump's playing up" (347, ellipsis in original). Despite his complaining however, Hawkins makes it clear that life as a farmer suits Matt: "he had ended up just exactly where he was meant to be" (405). In *Divine*, the central love interest Gil Sorenson is also a Pākehā dairy farmer. The description of his occupation frames him as practical, capable and skilled: "He had paddocks to fertilize, a maize crop to put down, drains that needed clearing and a herd of cows needing artificial insemination" (234). In *Blackpeak Station*, Rob, the central love interest, initially works as an accountant specialising in the financial management of farms. Consequently, he recognises the particular uncertainties of farming, such as the pressures of being at the mercy of the weather: "'Half the firm's clients could go under on the back of this storm,' he told them grimly" (86). By the end of the novel, he leaves his profession in accounting to work on the station in order to be with Charlotte permanently: "'It's a bit of a stretch for me, qualifications wise.' Rob raised her chin. 'But I saw someone around these parts was advertising for a shepherd'" (308).¹⁰ Hence, in this novel, the central love interest actually abandons the type of occupation likely to be favoured by British and North American chick lit love interests for the distinctly un-glamorous and un-romantic rural occupations often found in New Zealand texts, making this local divergence from the conventions of the genre all the more deliberate and significant. The idealisation of farming embodies what Bell calls the "rural myth, a central part of national identity" (*Inventing New Zealand* 65). Thus it is clear that my selected texts incorporate popular, imagined, understandings of New Zealand character into these chick lit narratives.

¹⁰ In the sequel to this novel, *Blackpeak Vines* (Ford 2014), Rob and Charlotte are still living and working together on the property, although it is clear that Charlotte retains managerial superiority of the business.

The blending of chick lit conventions with mythic understandings of New Zealand cultural identity is especially clear in *Knotted*. Like the genre itself, in this text, the central love interest must adapt to the New Zealand setting. Ross Fabello is an American novelist with an Irish mother and an Italian father, and as such his background is significantly more multicultural than the other love interests within my sample of texts. He is an author of acclaimed and popular crime novels, and during the course of the narrative he writes a screenplay for which he wins an Academy Award in the epilogue. This career is at odds with the stereotypical occupations of the other love interests in my sample of texts, and is more in line with the conventions of British and North American chick lit. As such, the importation of this more cosmopolitan character requires some careful adjustments in order to be made acceptable to both the New Zealand setting and the implied readers of these novels. Accordingly, Holman is careful to emphasise that Ross is not pretentious or affected:

It occurred to Ross that somewhere along the line he might have turned into that nightmare creature, the celebrity prima donna. He dismissed the idea; he wasn't the type. (30)

This momentary insight into his point of view assigns him the characteristic modesty and distaste for ostentation of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype, even though he is not a New Zealander. By the end of the narrative it is clear that “Ross’s temporary residence in New Zealand seemed to have turned him into an honorary Kiwi” (315). This observation follows an escapade when Ross returns Danny’s two sheep after they had escaped from her garden by transporting them in the back of his expensive car. As such, it illustrates his development from someone who likes to keep his car in pristine condition (54), to being more pragmatic: “[t]he sheep got out. How else was I supposed to get them home?” (315). Consequently, Ross acquires many of the

mythologised skills of the Kiwi Bloke, echoing the way that the genre itself is adapted for a local readership.

Associated with these typically rural lifestyles and activities is the capacity to undertake Do-It-Yourself (DIY) repairs without requiring professional help. In *Knotted*, Ross offers to fix a trampoline for his niece and nephew Matt and Mia, asking a neighbour: “If you lend me the equipment, I’ll fix it” (112). Although he does not have his own tools, he duly does mend the trampoline leg, and also planes the front door that does not shut properly (112). Similarly, in *Divine*, Gil is conscientious: “I just came over to look at the potholes to see how much aggregate I’ll need to fill them” (77). He later does repair them, and Tara is grateful: “He’d filled in the potholes in the race ... and Tara wanted to thank him” (88). This affirms the value of Gil’s skills as a handyman, while also facilitating another encounter between the couple. Significantly, in both of these instances Ross and Gil are not doing their own repairs, but are helping others – albeit in a practical, rather than emotional way. This is perhaps because these novels are written by – and largely for – women, and the characterisation of the central love interests is carefully constructed to appeal to their fantasies. One part of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype, the qualities of resourcefulness and practicality, are separated from and favoured over another, the conceptualisation of the isolated “man alone” figure. Consequently, this exemplifies how myths of New Zealand cultural identity are themselves revised to appeal to the implied readers’ romantic fantasies, in which the central love interests are generous with their time and in their relationships with others.

The activities of these central love interests reflect popular understandings of New Zealand identity, and are more particularly aligned with the Kiwi Bloke stereotype. As mentioned above, the Kiwi Bloke allegedly “can fix anything” (Law,

Campbell, and Schick 14). Similarly, Hepözden identifies DIY skills as a defining characteristic of New Zealanders (77). Jensen argues that New Zealand literature's emphasis on "manly practical skills derives from the idea of New Zealanders as pioneering stock" (19). Long after pioneers converted the native landscape into farmland, rural myths of New Zealand masculinity continue to be reproduced and adapted in my selected texts, suggesting there is a contemporary desire for such characters among the implied readers of these novels.

Alongside their typically rural occupations and propensity to undertake manual labour, the central love interests in my sample of texts often enjoy rugby, either as a career or as a hobby. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, the central love interest Mark Tipene retains a connection to the mythic rural lifestyle by helping with some farm work during his time off work. Mark explains to Helen that he stayed with a friend: "he had a couple of big farm jobs he needed a hand with. Retagging the herd, and giving them all copper bullets" (42).¹¹ However, Mark's primary occupation is as a professional rugby player and a senior figure in the All Blacks, the New Zealand national men's rugby team. As such he is somewhat of a New Zealand celebrity, intensifying the level of public interest in his romantic relationships. The most common careers of New Zealand chick lit love interests are highlighted in this comic conversation between Helen and her ex-boyfriend, Lance, when he reacts to the news that she has a new partner:

'So you've bowed to the inevitable and hooked up with a dairy farmer?'

'No actually. A rugby player.' (83)

¹¹ Copper bullets are a nutrient supplement for cattle.

This short exchange ironically identifies two of the most prominent tropes of New Zealand masculinities. While the evocation of these recognisable stereotypes has a comic effect, it also affirms these identities as desirable partners for the protagonist. Within my sample alone, only Ross in *Divine* has a career outside farming or professional sport, but he is a North American character and so is not a “true” Kiwi Bloke, although as mentioned, he undergoes a process of adaption and conversion to the local type. Merryn Corcoran’s *The Paris Inheritance* (2014) also features an All Black as the central love interest.¹² While some New Zealand texts such as Felicity Price’s *A Jolt to the Heart* (2014) and Wendyl Nissen’s *The Road from Midnight* (2013) include love interests who work outside of these fields, the majority of New Zealand chick lit texts feature men working in professional sport or the farming sector (See Appendix Two).¹³

However, rugby does not only feature as a career of New Zealand chick lit love interests, but is also portrayed as a hobby. In *Dinner at Rose’s*, Matt is an avid follower of rugby. When his (ultimately unsuitable) girlfriend Cilla is upset that he fails to answer her phone calls, she mistakenly thinks he has spent the night with Jo. He responds: “You knew I was watching the rugby at Scott’s” (162). This positions sport spectatorship as a particular interest of male characters and their friends. Matt’s

¹² *The Paris Inheritance* was not included in my selection of texts because a large proportion of the narrative is set in Europe.

¹³ Price’s novel *A Jolt to the Heart* features a freelance journalist as the central love interest. This novel was not included in my sample due to the older age of the protagonist falling within the “Hen Lit” category. The love interest in Nissen’s novel is an architect. This text is not included in my sample due to much of the narrative being set in Europe.

enthusiasm for rugby is reinforced after he gets together with Jo when they read different sections of the newspaper:

‘Finished with the sports section?’ Matt asked.

‘Trade you for world news.’

‘Libya’s still a mess, and the French farmers are rioting.’

‘Why?’ I asked, handing over the rugby page.

‘Didn’t bother to read that far,’ he said. (341)

This highlights Matt’s enjoyment of rugby, while also showing that he takes note of global news stories, even if he only reads the headlines. This also illustrates that they are romantically compatible when they both take turns to read the rugby page, emphasising that Jo is a better match for Matt than Cilla, and reinforces an interest in the sport as an idealised characteristic of New Zealand cultural identity.

A passion for rugby has long been linked with popular conceptions of New Zealand masculinity, and is mythologised as a characteristic of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype (Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* 183; Pringle 61; Hepözden 77; Jensen, *Whole Men* 20). In most cases the love interests’ enthusiasm for rugby casts them as typical Kiwi Blokes without significantly facilitating any character or narrative development. However, the inclusion of rugby as an occupation and interest of these characters implies that it also appeals to readers of these texts, or is at least accepted as an appealing aspect of stereotypical New Zealand masculinity. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* in particular, Mark’s career as a professional rugby player offers readers an opportunity to vicariously experience what it is like to be in a relationship with a – fictional – All Black. Consequently, this fulfils the “fantasy” function of chick lit, and in a way that is explicitly localised and different from typical British and North American texts of the genre.

Many of the love interests in my selected texts also display an enthusiasm for drinking beer. For example, in *Dinner at Rose's*, Matt simultaneously embodies characteristics of practicality, DIY, “kiwi ingenuity”, and beer drinking in one smooth movement when Jo joins him while he is milking, bringing some beer with her:

I removed a bottle of beer from each of my pockets and handed one over. “Bugger. I forgot to bring a bottle opener.”

“Don’t worry, pass it here,” said Matt, whereupon he twisted the two tops together and opened them both. (19)

This showcases his resourcefulness and skill. His subsequent declaration: “Jose, you’re a legend” (19) for bringing him a bottle of beer is hyperbolic, but still indicates his gratitude and appreciation. This exchange also portrays Matt as self-deprecating when he claims that his ability to open two beer bottles simultaneously is “almost my only skill” (19). His laconic sense of humour plays down his other skills, such as handling the animals, running a successful farm, and caring for his family. This echoes the self-deprecation shown by the protagonists, which as discussed in the previous chapter is mythologised and imagined to be a key aspect of New Zealand cultural identity.

The beer consumed by the love interests in my selected texts also reveals their particular tastes and preferences, and as such, operates as a means of characterisation. In *Divine*, Gil also likes beer, seen when he “dropped into the bottle store to pick up the beer” (234) for himself and Eric. Similarly, in *Knotted*, Ross requests a drink: “I’ll have a beer, too, please” (235). In *Blackpeak Station*, Rob is also aligned with beer drinking and iconography. Charlotte observes that he looks “like a poster boy for Speight’s” (28), a well-known brand of New Zealand beer. This also assumes the reader is familiar with the Speight’s advertising material, which describes the

“Southern Man”. This campaign claimed several characteristics of the Kiwi Bloke are unique to New Zealand males from the Otago region who favour Speight’s as their beer of choice.¹⁴ In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Mark also drinks beer. His preference is established by his response when Helen asks him:

‘What would you like to drink? I’ve got beer, if you don’t mind Waikato, or that very classy-looking wine you brought with you. Or milk.’

‘Beer please. I don’t think milk would give the right impression.’ (28)

This implies he is down to earth and unpretentious, although his willingness to provide a more “classy-looking” option for Helen should she want it shows that he is thoughtful and considerate. This exemplifies the distinctions of taste and class that Bourdieu identifies and that were discussed in the introduction. The above extract associates wine with being of comparatively “higher” class, and something that Matt is able to afford and gift to others, even though his own more apparently modest preference is for beer. Notably, these love interests do not show a preference for craft beers, which may be dismissed as more pretentious or cosmopolitan because they differentiate between quality. Instead, these blokes simply request a beer – any beer – because they are not fussy or overly expressive. Drinking beer is a recognised pastime of the Kiwi Bloke figure (Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* 164; Law, Campbell, and Schick; Campbell, Law and Honeyfield 167). Like the typical enthusiasm for rugby

¹⁴ The Speight’s advertisements have been analysed with respect to their stereotypical representation of New Zealand masculinities (Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* 164; Campbell, Law, and Honeyfield 177). As Cultural Studies scholar Claudia Bell explains, “There is no counter-type, no Northern Man” (*Inventing New Zealand* 165).

displayed by the love interests in my sample of texts, this trait adds little to the novels in terms of character or narrative development. But by including a preference for beer as a trait of the love interests in my selected texts, the conventions of British and North American chick lit are further adapted for local readers, as the authors incorporate certain mythologised characteristics of the Kiwi Bloke into the central love interests' personalities.

Many of the love interests in my selected texts are also cast as being reluctant to discuss or express emotions. For example, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, when Helen discusses her mother's death she observes:

Mark was wearing the alarmed expression of a man who finds himself dropped without warning into the middle of a deep and meaningful conversation, and taking pity on him, I changed the subject. (69)

In *Knotted*, Ross is also reluctant to express his emotions: "getting him to open up was like trying to break into the Tower of London for an after-hours peek at the Crown Jewels" (78). Like Mark's "alarmed expression," this simile comically exaggerates Ross' inability to express his emotion, portraying this characteristic in an affectionate, humorous light. Similarly, in *Divine*, Gil is uncomfortable when it comes to talking about the death of his wife some years ago: "he didn't make a practice of spilling his guts" (287). When Gil feels uncomfortable after being intimate with Tara in the bed he had previously shared with his late wife, he lashes out, rather than talking to her (278). Afterwards, Gil knows "he needed to explain, but he wasn't up to the job right now. How could he explain when he didn't entirely understand his feelings himself?" (279). In this novel, the third person point of view is usually restricted to Tara's thoughts, observations, and experiences. However, in this instance (and a few others to be discussed in section 2.2) Holman temporarily gives readers

access to Gil's point of view, allowing them to understand that he has emotions he cannot articulate. In *Dinner at Rose's*, Matt also displays this trait in relation to both romantic entanglements and family hardships. When Cilla engages Matt in an argument, Jo notices Matt's embarrassment and observes that he "would rather have his teeth pulled than discuss relationship stuff in public" (162). Matt's reluctance to express his feelings is further highlighted:

I hugged him, hard.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome. Why?"

"For – for understanding that not everything needs to be discussed."

"That's what comes of being raised by a man who tried never to discuss *anything*." (350)

Their mutual understanding highlights their compatibility as a couple. It also draws attention to how entrenched this characteristic is, with Jo noting that it is shared between generations of New Zealand men in the novel, as it is between many of the love interests within my sample.

Significantly, emotional repression has been identified as a mythologised characteristic of New Zealand masculinities and the Kiwi Bloke figure (Jensen 30; Law, Campbell, and Schick 14; Worth, Paris, and Allen 24; Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* 163). However, in these New Zealand chick lit texts the love interests' reluctance to discuss their emotions (or emotional subjects) is read by the protagonists as evidence of their sensitivity. As such, this trait implies that these male characters have hidden emotional depths, even though the exact nature of their feelings often remains mysterious to both protagonists and readers of these novels. By retaining love

interests' capacity to feel, but without the ability to articulate how they feel, the authors ensure that these characters are not one-dimensional or unsympathetic reincarnations of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype. Accordingly, this is a further way myths relating to New Zealand cultural identity are fused with conventions of British and North American chick lit love interests in my selected texts.

As detailed above, the love interests of my selected texts are assigned several recognised traits of the Kiwi Bloke. This aids in their characterisation, given that this figure is instantly recognisable to a New Zealand readership. The deployment of this stereotype also has a comic effect. As mentioned in the introduction, the Kiwi Bloke figure has been especially utilised as a source of humour. This is best seen in the works of comic novelist Barry Crump, and the television sketches featuring the character Fred Dagg, created by comedian John Clarke. Their success indicates that there was a considerable public appetite for and engagement with their work. In an interview conducted by Cultural Studies scholars Ruth Schick and John Dolan, New Zealand Masculinities critic Jock Phillips explains that the Kiwi Bloke figure successfully generates comedy when the audience is

sufficiently detached to laugh at it. You laugh at Barry Crump because you identify with the type, and yet you've moved sufficiently away that you can also begin to see that it is now exaggerated. Myth comes to be seen as myth. That's what makes it funny. (Schick and Dolan 59)

This explains that the comic effect of the Kiwi Bloke relies on the audience's ability to recognise it as a stereotype, and their understanding that it does not accurately reflect real life. It also alludes to the idea that there is an element of truth to this type which audiences "identify with", and that the exaggeration of this truth generates humour. Though the central love interests in my selected texts are not as exaggerated

as Barry Crump's characters or Fred Dagg, the Kiwi Bloke stereotype is so familiar to New Zealand audiences that its explicit presence in these novels adds to their comic and light-hearted tone. Likewise, Bell claims that:

The traditional bloke characteristics are readily recognised, not because they are necessarily based on real people whom we know, but because this 'type' has now been around for a very long time. The accessible national joke is drawn from the dominant thread that runs through the recounting of national history, with farmers for generations epitomising the self-reliant, ingenious Man Alone. (*Inventing New Zealand* 165)

The description of the Kiwi Bloke as an "accessible national joke" is particularly useful to explain how this figure is depicted in New Zealand chick lit. The characterisation of these love interests works as an ironic 'in-joke' between authors and readers of these novels. My selected texts simultaneously invite readers to laugh at the Kiwi Bloke, while also reproducing this myth as a dominant mode of masculinity in New Zealand fiction. This primarily identifies these love interests as practical, capable, and unpretentious, employing this widely recognised stereotype to do so in a comic and self-reflexive way.

2.2 BLOKES WITH FEELINGS

While many of the traits of the Kiwi Bloke are included in the love interests of my selected texts, these characters are not wholesale reincarnations of this figure. This is because the exclusive use of this stereotype would risk casting them as one-dimensional and unappealing. Chick lit's success depends on readers having some emotional connection to these characters. The authors of my selected texts address

this in several ways. For example, the love interests' fondness for watching rugby and drinking beer – two such superficial traits – is never taken to excess, and they do not abuse alcohol. The implication that these characters have hidden emotional depths, as discussed above, is another way the authors encourage readers to sympathise with them. Some recognised characteristics of the Kiwi Bloke are completely absent in these love interests. Phillips identifies mateship as a significant aspect of mythologised New Zealand masculinities (26), along with scornful attitudes towards women and marriage (37). Likewise, Bell argues that the Kiwi Bloke figure is often depicted as being “suspicious of emotional attachments as symbolised by women” (*Inventing New Zealand* 163). A recurring feature of Barry Crump's comic novels are the male characters' nagging wives and their strange obsessions, who are often framed as being the obstacle to the male characters' freedom and happiness (Sturm, *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* 610). My selected novels reject these elements of the stereotype. They are instead displaced by the love interests' positive romantic relationships with the protagonists, and any male-to-male friendships are largely excluded. This reflects the conventions of the chick lit genre as a whole, which is largely focused on the love story and the reflection of readers' realities and fantasies – although the characterisation of chick lit love interests and their romantic interactions with the protagonists appeals less to realism than it does to fanciful escapism. In order to temper the apparently tough persona of the Kiwi Bloke, the authors of my selected texts invoke certain traits of conventional love interests from British and North American chick lit.

Although the authors explicitly show that the love interests in my selected texts are typically reluctant to discuss their feelings (as discussed above), they do occasionally express their emotions. In *Dinner at Rose's*, Matt reacts emotionally to

his aunt Rose's announcement that her breast cancer is terminal and that she has decided to stop having chemotherapy. He suggests other treatment options, to which Rose responds:

“Matthew, hush.” He hushed, with an effort that hurt to watch. “We’ve given it a good solid try, but the rotten thing has spread right through my lungs now, and into the bone” ... She held out a hand to him, and on taking it Matt, who I had never seen anything but stoical in the face of bad news, sank abruptly into the skirt of her dressing gown. (189)

This shows that although Matt exhibits the familiar Kiwi Bloke characteristic of repressing emotion in some circumstances, in others he expresses raw grief. In this instance he cries openly along with Jo and Kim: “He sat up straight and swiped the sleeve of his shirt across his wet face” (190), showing that Matt is not simply a reproduction of the Kiwi Bloke, but rather a revised version of this New Zealand stereotype. This blend of characteristics compels Jo to comfort Matt in this distressing situation: “I touched his hand because I couldn’t help it, and he reached out without looking to grip my fingers in his” (189). Matt’s emotional capacity elicits Jo’s sympathy, and creates a balance between his conventional masculinity and his more sensitive vulnerability – even if the latter is only apparent in extreme circumstances. In this way, this Kiwi Bloke trait is adapted to be more compatible with the romantic conventions of the chick lit genre.

The love interests in my selected texts also express their emotional affection for the protagonists, an essential component of the genre. Matt’s inarticulate but sincere mode of telling Jo he loves her also illustrates this combination of characteristics. This episode captures both his depth of feeling, but also his difficulty expressing how he feels about Jo: ““Oh hell,’ he said hopelessly. ‘Jo, I’m sorry. I’m a

moron and – and you probably want me to go take a running jump, but I love you so much’ (270). This is significant because despite his discomfort, Matt manages a self-effacing but genuine declaration of love. Jo affirms that he is the perfect man for her:

I looked up at him and my heart contracted painfully ... this scruffy haired friend of mine with his slow voice and lazy crooked smile was the kindest, most attractive, *best* man I had ever known. (285)

Likewise, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Mark is ultimately confirmed as Helen’s ideal partner when he declares his love for her out loud, having previously said little about his feelings. On his return to New Zealand following an All Blacks tour of South Africa, Helen embraces Mark: “He hugged me back, dropping his chin onto the top of my head. ‘I love you’” (270). This uncharacteristic declaration by a normally taciturn man intensifies the appeal to readers’ fantasies, by showing this kind but emotionally repressed male character who is finally able to acknowledge his feelings. As such, this myth of New Zealand masculinity is blended with the established romantic gestures typical of British and North American chick lit.

The emotional capacity of the love interests in my selected texts is not confined to their own personal feelings and experiences, but also encompasses their expressions of empathy and care for the protagonists. For example, in *Dinner at Rose’s*, Matt recognises the level of stress Jo is under as she maintains the multiple demands of her career, the sale of the Melbourne house she co-owns with her ex-partner, as well as caring for Rose, who is terminally ill. Aware that Jo is fulfilling most of the caring responsibilities, he sympathises: “‘this is crap,’ he said. ‘You’ve already got a full-time job, and then you get home and start again here’” (267). Matt’s perceptiveness in this instance illustrates that he is attuned to her workload, and he further seeks to alleviate some of the pressure. When Rose’s condition deteriorates

considerably, she becomes unwilling and unable to feed herself, and Matt helps to take care of her:

Matt, cleanshaven this evening although still shaggy as to hair, got up silently and went to the fridge for the vanilla custard ... and handed it to his aunt.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“Three spoonfuls,” he said matter of factly, taking the cup back and offering spoonful number one. (324)

This shows that as well as embodying the established characteristics of the heavily mythologised Kiwi Bloke figure, Matt also fulfils a caring role. Hawkins’s specific choice of language to describe how “matter of factly” he speaks to Rose highlights that though he is caring for Rose, he still does so in a no-nonsense, pragmatic way, balancing his stoicism with qualities of compassion and kindness.

Likewise, in *Divine*, Gil demonstrates these qualities towards Tara. Many years ago when his son Jake was a toddler, Gil’s wife died suddenly. Upon seeing Tara weeping by the river he empathises with her sadness, even though at this time in the novel they are not on good terms:

[T]he grief and pain in her voice made his chest feel tight. Tara Whitehead had opened up old scars, reminding Gil what it was like to feel so utterly hopeless and empty that getting through the next minute was a struggle, let alone a day, a month or a year. (78)

This extract temporarily gives the reader access to Gil’s point of view, which is otherwise restricted to Tara for the majority of this novel. This enables the reader to understand the depth of his own emotional experiences and that Gil is sensitive to others, something that Tara doesn’t know at this point in the narrative. Gil is further

depicted as considerate when he gives Tara advice about running the farm (196) and teaches her to ride horses (240), demonstrating his attentiveness to her needs in a practical sense. While Gil's farming expertise is a mythologised aspect of the Kiwi Bloke figure, his care for Tara indicates that he is an updated, more enlightened version of this stereotype and casts him as the right man for her.

In *Knotted*, Ross is also framed as sensitive, illustrated by the way he intuitively understands Danny. Ross arrives in New Zealand to track down his niece and nephew, Matt and Mia, who are in Danny's custody. They are the orphaned children of his brother and Nella, Danny's sister. As such, Ross and Danny have each lost a sibling, enabling Ross to recognise why Danny is so guarded and empathise with her:

Ross could tell Danny was uncomfortable about revealing so much of herself, and wasn't surprised when she went on the offensive—in her shoes, he would have done the same. (33)

As in *Divine*, Holman temporarily gives the reader access to Ross's point of view, showing them what Danny does not yet know; that he understands her initial hostility towards him. Holman is the only author of my selected texts who manipulates third person point of view in this way, and in doing so she directly shows readers the compassionate capabilities of the love interests in her novels. Ross is further cast as understanding when he recognises the multiple pressures on Danny:

She was overloaded by her commitments at the hospital and at home. Ross couldn't do anything about work, but he could do something about things at home. He arranged for a weekly ironing and cleaning service. (194)

In doing so, Ross takes practical action to help Danny. Not only does he perceptively realise the difficulty of Danny's situation, but rather than merely commiserating with her, he also pragmatically provides a solution. This instance also embodies a significant component of chick lit by reflecting a fusion of many women's realities and fantasies. The "reality" factor in this example is Danny's struggle with all of her duties and responsibilities, while the "fantasy" is that a handsome, rich, and intelligent man recognises this strain and hires help to alleviate her stress. As such, this novel enables readers to vicariously experience the protagonist's relief from the multiple pressures of everyday life. Notably, Ross does not take up ironing and cleaning himself, instead employing someone else to do this work. He does, however, cook for the family. He makes Danny and the children gourmet dishes to a high standard: "Stuffed chicken breasts with green peppercorn sauce ... Danny chewed some chicken and nearly groaned in ecstasy as the flavours burst on her tongue" (198). As a result, the characterisation of Ross blends the typically cosmopolitan and sensitive qualities of British and North American chick lit love interests with the pragmatism associated with the Kiwi Bloke myth.

The above examples illustrate the different ways the love interests in my selected texts demonstrate their compassion, empathy and sensitivity towards others, and express their particular affection for the protagonists. These characteristics are typical of the love interests in British and North American chick lit. Burns argues that the most significant characteristic of chick text love interests is that they must be "Hopelessly Devoted" (17) to the protagonist.¹⁵ She explains that

¹⁵ Burns analyses "Chick Flicks" as well as Chick lit. "Chick Flick" is a term given to films that reflect the conventions of chick lit novels. Texts in Burn's sample include the novels *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by Helen Fielding, *Shopaholic and Baby* (2007), by

[T]he most important facet of all when it comes to acceptable masculinity for a chick hero is that he is completely and utterly in love with the heroine – if not at the beginning of the text, certainly by the end. (17)

As discussed above, the love interests in my selected texts express their devotion to the protagonists through dialogue. However, they also demonstrate their love through their actions. These characters are attuned to the emotional needs of the protagonists, able to empathise with their situations, and crucially, take practical action to help them. While declarations of love and sensitivity are typical of British and North American love interests, these characters' pragmatic approach to helping the protagonists is reminiscent of the Kiwi Bloke. As such, the love interests in my selected texts are the product of these two influences, and are deliberately constructed to appeal to a New Zealand market.

Burns also argues that typical love interests of British and North American chick texts are often framed as ideal father figures (15), usually through their positive interactions with children in the narrative. Of my selected texts, this trait is most explicitly evident in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*. When Helen and Mark are babysitting Helen's young stepsisters Bel and Caitlin early in the novel, Mark has fun with them:

He picked her (Bel) up and slung her over his shoulder to carry her shrieking with laughter up the hall ... That section of the female brain that assesses men for good father potential (it just comes standard

Sophie Kinsella, and romantic comedy film *The Holiday* (2006), directed by Nancy Meyers.

with two X chromosomes; you can't help it) noted this and nodded approvingly to itself. (115)

This clearly demonstrates Mark's easy ability with children, and also indicates that Helen considers this to be a desirable trait in a romantic partner. However it also naturalises heterosexual desire by suggesting that females are biologically driven to have children with males and disregards the influence of cultural practices and norms. This implies that all women are driven by these apparently innate and uncontrollable impulses, assuming that this is a universal consequence of being female regardless of sexuality or whether they wish to have children at all. Nevertheless, this is yet another example of the ways in which recognised traits of British and North American chick lit love interests are imported into my selected New Zealand texts and temper the elements of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype.

Despite the presence of such conservative fantasies of romance and parenthood, many of the love interests in my selected texts are also portrayed as socially progressive in relation to charitable causes and their attitudes to gender politics. This is a further departure from the Kiwi Bloke stereotype that casts these characters as more appealing, both to the protagonists and the implied readers of these texts. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Helen reads an article about Mark in a rugby magazine that describes him as:

A man who raises money for victims of domestic violence, who has had a beer with the Prime Minister and drunk tea with the Queen of England, and yet who recently refused a lucrative book deal on the grounds that his life wouldn't make very interesting reading. (51-52)

Mark's reluctance to publish a biography illustrates his modesty and implies he is uncomfortable about being the centre of attention. Simultaneously, his specific choice

to support a domestic violence charity shows that he recognises the need to help those in dangerous situations, with women and children being the main beneficiaries of his altruism. As such, this passage highlights the blend of Mark's Kiwi Bloke attributes with his additional qualities of sensitivity and compassion. This is particularly important given that myths relating to New Zealand masculinities – and particularly the “man alone” figure – can and have been associated with violence, and especially domestic violence. For instance, Barry Crump, a “living stereotype” of the Kiwi Bloke, was violent to several of his wives and partners (Magner). Accordingly, Mark's philanthropy in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* distances him from this trait, reassuring readers of these texts that he is respectful, non-violent, and progressive in order to satisfy and fulfil the romantic conventions of the genre.

The characterisation of the love interests in my selected texts can also challenge traditional gender roles and assumptions. This is most acute in *Blackpeak Station*. By the end of the novel, Rob gives up his established accounting career to move to the station to live and work with Charlotte. However, it is clear that he is willing to relinquish his personal success much earlier in the narrative. Charlotte and Rob become a couple close to the beginning of the novel, but when Rob is offered a job in Christchurch, far away from the station, he has to choose whether to accept it. Discussing his options with Charlotte, Rob makes it clear he would like to be with her more permanently: “‘Ask me to stay,’ he said suddenly, ‘and I will’” (106). This indicates that he is willing to make personal sacrifices to be with her. However, she feels unable to do so: “She couldn't ask Rob to give up his dreams for her. It would be like someone asking her to leave Blackpeak” (106). Rob takes the job, and the couple separate. Later in the novel they are reunited when Rob declares: “It's always been you” (305), and this time Charlotte takes the opportunity to ask him to stay. Rob

agrees, suggesting he works as a shepherd at the station, and the epilogue features them working together on a muster (309). Although Rob leaves his job for a career more typical of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype, his decision is significant because it rejects the entrenched patriarchal notion that woman should sacrifice their personal endeavours, particularly their careers, for love. As such, Rob's characterisation draws on both the enlightened, progressive traits typical of British and North American chick lit love interests, as well as mythic understandings of New Zealand masculinities.

Socially progressive attitudes relating to gender are depicted in a different way in another love interest of my selected texts. The premise *Divine* of is established in the prologue when Tara's then husband Richard comes out as transgender, and announces he is leaving her. When Tara's ultimate "Right Man" Gil learns that this is the reason Tara has been so insecure in the wake of her marriage break up, he reassures her "You couldn't stop Richard from doing what he did, Tara. He was born that way" (331). This illustrates that Gil believes being transgender is not a choice. Although Gil uses the personal pronoun "He" rather than "She" in this instance, it is clear that both Gil and Tara ultimately accept Rachel and remain on good terms with her when she is invited to their wedding in the epilogue (367). The socially progressive characteristics of these love interests make them more attractive to the protagonists by framing them as inclusive, selfless, and generous. As these qualities coexist with several traits of the Kiwi Bloke, this figure is revised. This implies that fans of these novels appreciate chick lit love interests that are more tolerant and open-minded.

One of the most obvious sites of fusion between the love interests' Kiwi Bloke characteristics and the conventions of British and North American chick lit is through

the portrayal of their appearances. Burns identifies looking “attractive” as a key characteristic of British and North American chick lit love interests (8). For example, in *Billy and Me*, Billy is “jaw-droppingly attractive, with brown hair swooped up in a stylish quiff, a healthy tan and deep brown eyes which twinkle as he smiles” (Fletcher 24). Similarly, Bridget Jones explains how she “tried to read myself to sleep with new issue of *Tatler* only to find Mark Bloody Darcy’s face smouldering out from a feature on London’s fifty most eligible bachelors going on about how rich and marvellous he was” (Fielding 194, italics in original). Love interests that look “attractive” are included in each of my selected texts, but their resistance to sophisticated fashion and style – a characteristic associated with the Kiwi Bloke stereotype – tempers this trait. Certainly, none of the love interests in my selected texts style their hair or are featured in a society magazine. For example, in *Dinner at Rose’s*, Jo observes of Matt:

He hadn’t changed much to look at – he was still tall and lean and brown-haired and slightly scruffy – but four years of farming had made him tougher looking ... he was sunburnt and cheerful, and had that classic dairy farmer’s tan: brown legs that turned lily-white below the gumboot line. (6)

This shows that like the protagonists of my selected texts, Matt is more concerned with practicality than looking good. The inclusion of Matt’s gumboot tan in this description comically aligns him with popular conceptions of the Kiwi Bloke figure. He also has a lack of interest in personal grooming that makes him more attractive to Jo, seen when Matt confesses he does not own a hairbrush, to which she deadpans: “Ah. That would explain this sexy and unkempt look you’ve been working” (286). Though ironic, this quip casts Matt as ruggedly handsome, suggesting that he looks great without – or perhaps because – he need not make an effort. In *Divine*, Gil’s

appearance is also presented as being generally unfashionable, yet attractive. Tara repeatedly emphasises her initial distaste at his overwhelming preference for brown clothing, noting when she first meets him:

Tara had never seen anybody made up of so many shades of brown: brown eyes, brown skin, and tufts of dark brown hair sticking out from beneath a dun-coloured woollen beanie pulled low over his brow ...

Even his waterproof jacket and leggings were brown. (65)

This suggests that Gil chooses clothing for practical rather than aesthetic reasons, with brown being resistant to stains from his work outdoors on the farm. As the novel progresses, however, Tara finds Gil more attractive, and she

kept getting distracted by how he looked when he wasn't wearing waterproof clothing, that hideous beanie and cow dung. His clothes were presentable and matched: beige moleskins, caramel coloured shirt, and a huge black sweater that hugged his chest and shoulders.

(114)

The portrayal of these characters as being simultaneously handsome, but pointedly uninterested in fashion or metrosexual grooming complements the depiction of the protagonists' appearances discussed in Chapter One. Moreover, it further demonstrates how my selected texts draw from both the conventions of the chick lit genre and popular understandings of New Zealand identity and culture.

The convergence of chick lit genre conventions and the Kiwi Bloke stereotype with respect to the love interests' appearances is perhaps most clearly seen in *Knotted*. Ross is also portrayed as attractive, and of all the love interests in my selection of texts, he displays the biggest interest in clothing:

He looked rested and almost human in faded denim jeans and a white T-shirt beneath a black leather jacket ... It wasn't the kind you found in a cheap chain store. Danny could hear the *ka-ching ka-ching* of a cash register as she stared. (44)

Consequently, it is clear that unlike the other love interests in this sample, Ross cares about how he looks and is prepared to spend money on more expensive clothes. This is at odds with the Kiwi Bloke stereotype, and is perhaps explained by the fact that he is from North America. But later in the novel, as he is undergoing his transformation into an "honorary Kiwi" (315), Danny observes that "there was nothing sensitive or artistic about his hands; they looked as if they'd be equally at home wrapped around the handle of a pneumatic drill" (119), indicating that he looks capable of undertaking physical labour. As such, he too is a hybrid figure, blending this aspect of the Kiwi Bloke figure with the attractive appearances of British and North American chick lit love interests.

The portrayal of the love interests' appearances in my selected texts also often emphasises their muscles, and therefore their strength. This is typical of British and North American chick lit, but also links to the kinds of occupations and activities favoured by the Kiwi Bloke stereotype. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, when Helen first meets Mark at a party, he has recently played a rugby match and is described as: "a big, dark, powerful looking man with extensive facial bruising" (5). It is significant that Mark is described as being "dark," because along with his surname, Tipene, it implies that he is of Māori descent. The novel makes no further mention of his ethnicity, or Māori culture. This suggests that its inclusion is simply another way of localising – and in this case indigenising – these texts, rather than offering any insights into his cultural background or the significance of Māori/Pākehā relations in

New Zealand (the representation of Māori characters, place names, and terms will be analysed further in Chapter 3). Subsequent references to his appearance repeatedly emphasise his muscles and the strength of his body. When it becomes clear that Mark is interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with Helen, Thomas, the receptionist at the vet office, searches for topless images of Mark online and shows them to her:

‘Here you go,’ he said, moving the mouse to enlarge a shirtless photo of a mud-streaked, olive-skinned god, chest muscles rippling, rugby ball in one big hand and a look of grim determination on his face. (21)

This instance clearly positions Mark’s body as an attractive spectacle, which is developed further when: “Mark pulled his filthy T-shirt off over his head and I temporarily lost my train of thought. He was *beautiful*: sleek and muscled and perfectly proportioned” (39). The recurring focus on his body as desirable aligns Matt with the love interests of British and North American chick lit, while his rugby bruises equate him with the Kiwi Bloke figure. As such, he is a hybridisation of these versions of masculinity. In *Blackpeak Station*, like the other love interests in this sample, Rob is conventionally handsome:

He ran a long, tanned, muscular hand through his mop of wavy blond hair, pushing it back from his eyes. He was wearing a checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a faded pair of Levis (28).

His physique is further emphasised later in the story once Charlotte has developed a more intimate relationship with him: “Charlotte ran her hands up his shoulders, the solid, muscular mass of his neck. He really did have the most spectacular upper body” (50). The repeated references to Rob’s muscles in these extracts frame him as attractive and suggest that he is capable of considerable physical strength, while the

inclusion of his checked shirt retains a connection to the rural environment associated with the Kiwi Bloke figure.

Depictions of these characters as conventionally handsome and aesthetically pleasing clearly portrays their bodies as “spectacular” and “to-be-looked-at” (40), a concept first applied to women’s bodies in Hollywood cinema by feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey. Burns applies this theory to the depiction of men’s appearances in chick lit, explaining that the genre: “has instated (or perhaps reinstated) a shorthand for ‘attractive’ masculinity”, featuring female characters that evaluate potential dates based on their appearance (8). This is significant because as Mulvey argues, conventionally, popular texts objectify women’s bodies for the pleasure of the male gaze (42). Chick lit however, reverses this gaze, instead featuring female characters that look at male bodies, and invites readers to imagine them. As well as looking conventionally handsome, the love interests in my selected texts typically lack an interest in fashion and personal grooming. Instead, male characters that excessively favour these pursuits are either gay, or are framed as undesirable (this will be discussed further in section 2.3 Juxtaposing Masculinities). This narrowly restricts the love interests in my selected texts to an attractive, but not overly cultivated aesthetic.

The characterisation of male love interests in chick lit is essentially linked to the genre’s reflection of contemporary women’s realities and fantasies. These novels enable readers to imagine being in a relationship with these characters. Ultimately, the qualities of capability, competence with Do-It-Yourself (DIY) repairs, interest in rugby, and general sense of toughness are tempered by these characters’ additional sensitivity, empathy, attentiveness to the protagonist, and progressive social attitudes. The balance of these elements is precarious. If these characters are too much like the

Kiwi Bloke stereotype, with its characteristic aversion to romance and expressionless persona, then they are a “Mr. Wrong”, to invoke Yardley’s term (13). However, if they embody certain traits of conventional British and North American love interests, such as being overly sophisticated, corporate, or metrosexual, then they are also a “Mr. Wrong”. These characters are narrowly prescribed a masculinity that is not so sensitive as to be saccharine, but is also not so stoic and hardened as to be unsympathetic. In finding a way to be romantic without succumbing to sentimentality, the love interests of New Zealand chick lit novels ultimately demonstrate their merit through their devotion to the protagonist. In contrast, the authors clearly establish that the female protagonists’ worth and capabilities lie outside their romantic relationships by emphasising their qualities of capability and independence, as discussed in Chapter One. As such, I contend that chick lit affords its female characters more diverse experiences, personalities, and choices than their male counterparts – except in the particular type of partner they choose, who, in my selected texts, are all insightful blokes with feelings.

2.3 JUXTAPOSING MASCULINITIES

Given the precarious balance that New Zealand chick lit authors have to strike within the masculinities described above, the function of other male characters proves all the more vital. The central love interests are not the only depictions of men included in my selected texts. This section explores the different men featured in these novels, including homosexual and transgender characters, as well as the more antagonistic ex-partners of the protagonists. Typically, these characters feature significantly less than the central love interests. However, their differences from the “Mr. Rights” in my

selected texts are important because they clearly delineate between ideal and undesirable versions of heterosexual masculinity.

One such alternative representation of masculinity identified in British and North American chick lit is the “gay-best-friend” character, who according to Harzewski “functions prominently as the protagonist’s confidante” (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 33) in early texts of the genre. A number of critics suggest this trope has featured less frequently over time due to its initial overuse (Yardley 12; Ryan, “Trivial or Commendable?” 75; Ryan, “Stepping Out from the Margins” 143). Nevertheless, the “Simply marvellous gay friend” (Yardley 12) is one contrasting representation of masculinity that is affirmed and accepted by the genre. Heterosexual men who do not meet Burns’s criteria for ideal chick lit love interests are represented less favourably. Smyczyńska, in her article titled “Commitment Phobia and Emotional Fuckwittage: Postmillennial Constructions of Male ‘Other’ in Chicklit Novels”, claims that male characters are “othered” (which is to say that they are portrayed as being “not one of us”) by the disparaging commentary about men by the genre’s protagonists and their friends present in many texts (30).¹⁶ Though I agree that the genre “others” particular male characters, notably the protagonists’ ex-boyfriends and unsuitable partners who are framed as “Mr. Wrongs” (Yardley 13), I disagree that the same can be said of all male characters in chick lit novels. However, Smyczyńska’s work draws attention to the way chick lit’s representation of juxtaposing male characters assigns particular values to different masculinities.

¹⁶ Smyczyńska’s article draws her conclusion from a selection of chick lit texts including Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), Jane Green’s *Mr Maybe* (1999), and Marian Keyes’s *Sushi for Beginners* (2001).

The depiction of these “other” characters’ appearances is one way they contrast with the central love interests. In *Blackpeak Station* (Ford), Charlotte spends the middle section of the narrative in a relationship with Luke. Charlotte’s brother Nick dubs Luke “Armani guy” (17), due to the expensive designer suits Luke wears, warning Charlotte: “The Armani-guys of this world don’t do stuff for nothing” (133). Luke’s clothing suggests he takes a keen interest in fashion and his own appearance, unlike the central love interests in my selected texts. In *Knotted*, Patrick is presented in contrast to Ross, the central love interest. Patrick is not an ex-boyfriend of Danny’s, but is the now deceased ex-husband of her sister Nella, and is Ross’s brother. Like Luke, Patrick is also depicted as being particularly obsessed with his looks, antithetical to the preferred New Zealand chick lit love interests, who as established, eschew excessive grooming in favour of more practical considerations. Danny is not impressed by this, explaining:

Patrick took everything about his personal appearance very seriously – Danny suspected he’d been a supermodel in a previous life. ‘The only body parts I see getting a workout are your thumb on the remote control and your hair-dryer arm – *that* gets plenty of exercise.’ (8-9)

He is further condemned as a “pretty-boy” (137), who “only ever looked out for himself” (173). In *Dinner at Rose’s*, references to Jo’s unfaithful ex-boyfriend Graeme highlight his interest in personal grooming as vain and unappealing. Jo explains that Graeme is a “man who would rather pull out his own carefully groomed fingernails than apologise for anything” (181). She elaborates further on Graeme’s manicured hands, comparing him directly with Matt:

when he [Matt] slid his hands up my bare arms the calluses on his palms were rough against my skin. Graeme had soft smooth hands

with carefully maintained fingernails, and I wondered irrelevantly how I had ever been able to bear it. (284)

This directly juxtaposes two versions of heterosexual masculinity, casting Matt as more ideal for Jo, and the metrosexual Graeme as comparatively undesirable. The characterisation of these “Mr. Wrongs” as image obsessed and vain about their appearances contrasts with the more favourably represented love interests, who as discussed, are emphatically unconcerned with how they look. This juxtaposition reinforces the desirability of the central love interest, whose ultimate union with the protagonist is constructed to appeal to the fantasies of the implied readers of my selected texts, as discussed previously.

However, an interest in ones’ own appearance is portrayed as far more acceptable for homosexual men. *Dinner at Rose’s* also includes Stu, Jo’s old friend from the hospital where she previously worked in Melbourne. Jo describes him as “the campest gay man I have ever met and also one of the kindest people in the world” (121). She keeps in regular contact with him during the novel, and he eventually visits her in New Zealand. Stu provides another point of contrast to the central love interests, and embodies the “gay-best-friend” stereotype identified by Yardley in her list of features typical of the chick lit genre. She explains that these characters are frequently framed as “flamboyantly gay, over-the-top gay ... Often, they’re literal drag queens” (12). While Stu is not a literal drag queen, he is accepted and adored by Jo, even though he is “a city boy from the tips of his gelled hair to the soles of his expensive designer sneakers” (216). This aligns male characters’ excessive interest in fashion and personal presentation with homosexuality. In the negatively portrayed heterosexual characters discussed above, this is cast as an unappealing trait in a prospective partner, and is also allied with superficiality and

vanity. However, these criticisms seemingly do not apply to Stu, whose own vanity is worn like a badge of honour. This is likely because the “gay-best-friend” character fulfils a different function to that of the love interest, who, regardless of whether he is a “Mr. Right” or a “Mr. Wrong”, necessarily has romantic designs on the protagonist.

In this novel, Stu is essentially a literary device. From his outsider’s point of view he can see that Jo and Matt would be a good couple (as can the reader), and explicitly asks Jo: “‘Why aren’t you shagging the divine Matthew?’ Stu demanded. ‘He’s highly shaggable’” (221). He also is quick to adopt Jo’s attitude towards others, seen when Jo briefly complains about Cilla’s possessive behaviour, to which he responds promptly: “I hate her” (222). As such, Stu is a loyal, male best friend to Jo, who is completely accepting of Stu’s sexuality and camp personality. Conveniently for the narrative, his sexuality means that Stu does not pose a threat to the central romantic plot, because neither Jo nor Matt are attracted to him. He is however, the only “gay-best-friend” character present in my selection of texts, suggesting this convention of British and North American chick lit has not been widely adapted by New Zealand authors. This indicates there is a comparative under-representation of homosexual masculinities in New Zealand chick lit, although this trope was so overused in early texts of the genre that it became a “cliché” that more recent texts have avoided (Yardley 12; Ryan, “Trivial or Commendable?” 75; Ryan, “Stepping Out from the Margins” 143). Nevertheless, Jo’s warm relationship with Stu in this novel affirms and celebrates his “camp” (121) personality, despite its being typical of the “one-dimensional representation(s)” of homosexual men in British and North American chick lit (Ryan, “Stepping Out from the Margins” 143).

A less clichéd development occurs in *Divine* (Holman), when Tara’s ex-husband Richard undergoes gender reassignment surgery during the novel, and

identifies and is accepted as Rachel by the end.¹⁷ My inclusion of this character in a chapter discussing the representation of masculinities is not straightforward, because through her identification as transgender, Rachel is a woman, not a man. However, before Rachel's transition Richard was Tara's husband, a role deserving of analysis that is best placed alongside my discussion of the other ex-partners of the protagonists in my selected texts. In terms of the story, Richard is essentially a plot device. His decision to come out and end his marriage to Tara is the catalyst for the narrative, propelling her to leave Auckland for the Waikato. Furthermore, his decision ensures that Tara cannot return to her husband, leading her to reclaim her independence and freeing her to embark on a romantic relationship with Gil.

Tara and Gil ultimately show a progressive attitude towards Rachel, although she is initially heartbroken by the news that her husband is leaving her. Soon after their separation, Tara meets with Richard to discuss their financial situation, and she is sympathetic: "She saw the odd combination of suffering and peace in his eyes, and wondered how she had ever missed the anguish it had replaced" (34). Later in this exchange, Richard states: "I didn't have a choice about this ... some things are predetermined before a person is born ... I have a new name. I call myself Rachel" (34-35). Though Tara struggles to make peace with her shock at Rachel's new identity for much of the novel, it is clear by the end that with Gil's encouragement, they have accepted Rachel. This is seen in Tara's response when Gil assures her:

‘There is nothing you could have done to stop Rachel being the way she is. She was born that way.’

¹⁷ In my analysis, I will refer to this character as Richard and use male personal pronouns until the point at which Richard announces a preference for the name Rachel, to delineate between the time before and after her transition.

‘I know that.’ (366)

It is significant that in this instance, Gil uses the feminine personal pronoun, “she” to describe Rachel, because it illustrates that he fully accepts her as a woman. It is also notable that the author Michelle Holman reiterates again that to be transgender is not a choice, reinforcing this message to readers of the novel for a third time.¹⁸ Rachel later attends Tara and Gil’s wedding in the epilogue, evidently remaining on friendly terms with them: “Rachel, who was sitting in the audience wearing a large, grey picture-hat on her sleek bob, wept buckets during the ceremony” (367). As such, of all the ex-partners depicted in my selected texts, Rachel is treated the most sympathetically, and consequently, it is clear that *Divine* takes a progressive and accepting view of transgender characters. This is significant in a genre that tends to be associated with fixed gender roles, showing that chick lit can include people, events and situations that flagrantly challenge those conventions. In fact, as my analysis has shown, my selected texts are constantly reworking these “fixed” gender types typical of the genre through the characterisation of both the female protagonists and the central love interests, which hybridises the conventions of British and North American chick lit with popular myths about New Zealand cultural identity.

Aside from Richard, the protagonists’ ex-partners in my selected novels are further cast as undesirable through their condescending attitudes and unreliability. For instance, in *Dinner at Rose’s* Jo denounces her ex-boyfriend as “Graeme the Snob” (113), with further evidence of his arrogance seen when Jo describes how:

¹⁸ Rachel is the first character to refer to this, stating “I didn’t have a choice” (34), Gil is the second, explaining “He was born that way” (331), which he repeats again in this instance, reiterating “She was born that way” (366).

Graeme superintended my wardrobe and was snobbish about the wines he drank and when we went out for dinner he used to send back his meal two times out of three. And he sneered at Dolly Parton. (275)

This excerpt exemplifies the distinctions Bourdieu explains between “low” and “high” (468), demonstrating Graeme’s perception of his own superiority in taste and culture, which is cast as an unattractive quality. In *Blackpeak Station*, Luke is also portrayed as being flashy and ostentatious, seen when he opts to charter a helicopter back to Christchurch at considerable expense after his car is damaged going through a ford (122). In *Knotted*, Patrick is essentially a plot device. The inclusion, and specifically the death, of this character sets up the premise of the narrative when the guardianship of his and Nella’s children is entrusted to Danny. This in turn brings Patrick’s more respectable brother Ross into Danny’s life when he seeks to introduce the children to their paternal grandparents. Like Graeme and Luke however, Patrick is cast as egotistical and materialistic:

Patrick needed somebody to feed him constant bullshit, and confirm his place at the centre of the universe. He also needed a supersized plasma television, home gym and hot tub. (8)

This conveys that Patrick valued extravagant displays of wealth, framing him as showy and superficial. He is also depicted as an unreliable partner and father. Danny expresses her contempt towards him throughout the novel, beginning when she remembers how he behaved towards her sister: “Patrick’s visits to New Zealand were infrequent and brief, and Nella could go for months without hearing from him” (8), indicating the lack of care and duty he showed for his family. The ongoing derogatory commentary about Patrick casts him as a liability, unlike Ross, who ultimately takes responsibility by sharing the guardianship of Patrick’s children with Danny. In this

way, the portrayal of these “other” characters as grandiose and affected in contrast to the central love interests delineates between undesirable and favourable traits of heterosexual masculinities. In doing so, it implies that readers of these novels identify with these different value judgements and endorse the protagonists’ ultimate union with their “Mr. Right”.

The “Mr. Wrongs” included in my selected texts are also cast as oppositional to the central love interests through their occupations and manipulation of the protagonists’ assets. In *Blackpeak Station*, Luke is a property developer. Significantly, this corporate career is similar to those typically favoured by the central love interests in British and North American chick lit. It is notable that this occupation is immediately at odds with those of the love interests in my selected New Zealand texts because, as mentioned, the rejection of such cosmopolitan careers is one of the ways these novels adapt the conventions of the genre. Assigning this role to a “Mr. Wrong” character helps to create this distinction. Luke’s greed, and interest in developing the station into a lucrative investment is first implied when he finds out how much land belongs to the station: “Luke’s eyebrows shot up. ‘You’d fit a few golf holes on that’” (120). Charlotte seems not to notice Luke’s ulterior motive, but this exchange foreshadows the revelation of his plan to transform the station. Charlotte is horrified when she discovers Luke’s deception, furiously reading aloud from the brochure he had designed: “Blackpeak Station Resort ... welcome to Asia-Pacific’s new best hotel” (247). Ultimately, Luke’s characterisation in this way reinforces Rob as the right man for Charlotte, who does understand what Charlotte wants for the station and is content to work as her employee in order for her to be happy. This affirms the fusion of Kiwi Bloke characteristics with the more enlightened sensibilities typical of

British and North American chick lit love interests as more desirable, both to the protagonists and the implied readers of these novels.

The “other” masculinities in my selected texts are further cast as objectionable through their snide treatment of the protagonists – in stark opposition to the “devotion” Burns identifies as the most significant characteristic of chick lit heroes. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Helen’s ex-boyfriend Lance’s continued interference in her new relationship and unsolicited advice about how she should run her life depict him as an unsuitable partner for Helen. For example, when Lance boasts about the rare and difficult veterinary procedure he has completed that day, Helen complains how “he *always* trumped my work stories” (82), indicating that he is self-congratulatory and ungenerous. He also warns Helen not to pursue a romantic relationship with an All Black like Mark, telling her “they’re famous, they’ve got big disposable incomes, and everywhere they go they’ve got hundreds of silly little tarts lining up to sleep with them” (84). This gives the impression that Lance is competing with Mark, and feels threatened by Mark’s increasingly serious relationship with Helen. Though this character is never explicitly labelled as jealous, his rudeness about Mark reveals Lance’s petty and insecure personality. Lance further advises Helen on her pregnancy, much to her distaste. When he notices Helen drinking coffee, he sanctimoniously tells her that his pregnant sister Kate is avoiding caffeine. Bitterly, Helen responds sarcastically: “Good on her ... I’m sure her baby will turn out much better than mine” (264), indicating her frustration with his self-righteousness. Lance’s ongoing snide comments contrast with Mark, who respects Helen’s independence and ability to make her own choices. Mark expresses his dislike for Lance, telling Jo: “He was trying to weasel his way back into your knickers” (270). Lance’s irritating presence in Helen’s life is finally ended when she and Mark resolve their differences

and get together properly, fulfilling the romantic fantasy element essential to the genre and its appeal to readers.

The inclusion of these “other” male characters that are not the central love interests in my sample of texts distinguishes between desirable and undesirable masculinities. Significantly, homosexual and transgender characters are affirmed as acceptable, suggesting readers of these novels are open to progressive attitudes about sexualities and gender. Nevertheless, the protagonists each end up in happy heterosexual relationships, confining these other masculinities to minor roles. However, heterosexual male characters that fail to display modest, unpretentious values are represented unfavourably, and are additionally framed as image conscious, arrogant, and self-serving. The unforgiving portrayal of these apparently undesirable characters confirms the ultimate superiority of the central love interests, suggesting that the implied readers of these novels are enchanted by the particular combination of characteristics of these “Kiwi Mr. Rights”. As Burns explains of British and North American novels: “only a specific type of masculinity is acceptable for a chick text hero” (3). The ideal love interests of my selected texts are even more narrowly confined to this revised version of an entrenched New Zealand myth of manhood, a hybridised figure necessitated by the genre’s focus on the depiction of contemporary women’s realities and fantasies.

CHAPTER THREE: GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTINGS

Designer shopping and late night cocktails while looking over the city skyline may be typical of British and North American chick lit, but my selected New Zealand texts are more likely to feature gumboot shopping at The Warehouse, walks in the countryside, and a date in a run-down rural pub. For example, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* is set in New York City: "They saw the city, dusky and brown, looming up as the train went over a bridge ... after three cocktails at Ici, Carrie called Mr. Big" (87). The television series based on this book is especially known for its inclusion of the "Cosmopolitan" cocktail. Similarly, Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series heavily features designer shopping, seen in this excerpt set in Los Angeles: "I've just been into Armani and seen a grey cashmere jacket" (*Shopaholic to the Rescue* 67). The following analysis will demonstrate how, like the characterisation of the protagonists and the central love interests, the settings of my selected texts are markedly distinct from those typical of British and North American chick lit. This chapter examines these differences and their implications. As Alex Calder points out: "[s]ettings are idealised versions of actual places. They are locations that enable certain stories to be told and around which various aspirations and values take shape, are challenged and modified" (vii). My discussion of settings encompasses both the geographical and cultural locations of my selected narratives, examining the mythic ideals they evoke.

The representation of New Zealand landscapes is of note, particularly with respect to the prominence of rural settings in these texts, the contrast between country and city locations, and the depiction of the protagonists' strong, often healing connections to "nature". The cultural settings of my selected texts are also significant, due to the impression of "New Zealandness" constructed through references to local

accents and colloquial phrases, the representation of Māori culture and characters, and the inclusion of several recognisable aspects of New Zealand popular culture.

Ultimately, the depiction of these settings reproduces mythic and idealistic understandings of New Zealand and its cultural identity, suggesting that the implied readers of these texts are enchanted by contemporary romantic stories located in these places.

3.1 GEOGRAPHICAL SETTINGS

The geographical settings of my selected texts are different from those of conventional British and North American chick lit. Yardley identifies urban settings and locations as central tenets of classic chick lit, arguing: “[w]ith a metropolitan setting you are able to show more expensive clothing, more ethnic diversity, more upscale industries, and more fast-paced lifestyles” (11). Similarly, Harzewski writes that “[o]ne of chick lit’s most salient characteristics is its city setting”, adding that such settings evoke a “capacity for self-invention and atmosphere of possibility” (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 30). Some of the genre’s most recognised texts are set in such environments, including Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and Allison Pearson’s *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, which are both located in London, and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex in the City*, which is set in New York City. Though some of my selected texts include city locations, the glamorous, fast-paced, and urban lifestyles typical of British and North American texts are collectively rejected in favour of scenic “natural” landscapes and rural communities, often with agricultural ties.

In Barthes' *The Semiotic Challenge* (1988), he argues that “landscape is the cultural sign of nature” (68). In spite of their differences and various connotations, the

predominant settings depicted in my selected texts all signify nature to some degree. There are many types of landscapes present in New Zealand chick lit, which are aligned with a range of broader settings. For instance, rural towns are frequently featured in my selected texts, and are depicted in relation to farmed, agricultural landscapes. In other cases, idyllic beaches and ocean views are included, often as part of the wider setting of Auckland, New Zealand's most populated city ("Statistics New Zealand: Auckland Region"). However, they are not exactly "natural" landscapes – rural communities and farms are highly cultivated and manipulated even though they deal with aspects of nature such as plants and animals. As Alex Calder argues: "These days nature is as likely to be virtual as actual, managed as wild, and has come to seem more and more something that culture produces" (3). Un-manipulated, wild bush landscapes rarely feature in my selected texts. This is likely because community and connectedness are essential qualities of the chick lit genre. As Harzewski argues, protagonists' "urban family" (their group of friends) is a key feature of the genre (*Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 63).¹⁹ If a protagonist is "alone" in chick lit, it usually means she is single, rather than friendless or in an isolated setting. In my selected texts, the authors' choices about setting fundamentally cast New Zealand as an idyllic, beautiful, and harmonious place for their characters to live.

This is a very different approach to setting from that associated with some of New Zealand's most celebrated and acclaimed literary novels, which have been recognised as linking descriptions of landscapes with a mood of darkness and despair.

¹⁹ For example, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, she has a core group of friends who are central to her life, Shazza, Jude, and Tom (who is their 'Gay-Best-Friend'). Likewise, in Marian Keyes's *Last Chance Saloon*, the three central characters are best friends: Tara, Katherine, and Fintan (who is their 'Gay-Best-Friend').

Cultural nationalism emerged from the mid 1930s, and “sought to establish a thriving local culture and break with British traditions” (Barker). Evans argues that “[c]ultural nationalism established a *canon* of melancholy” (147, italics in original), found in several works of New Zealand literature, including the poetry of Alan Curnow and Charles Brasch, Frank Sargeson’s “That Summer”, and John Mulgan’s *Man Alone*. Evans explains that many texts of this period share an “obsessive interest in a hostile landscape that became increasingly the cultural nationalist touchstone” (147). Alex Calder links these landscapes with mythologies of New Zealand masculinities and emphasises their relationship to desolation and misery, describing “those strong silent types, those ‘hard men bred to a hard land’ and their dark aura of intimacy with struggle, violence and death” (234). Eggleton also identifies the emergence of “the brooding landscape,” which he describes as “atavistic”, “savage”, and “raw” in New Zealand literary novels (17). He argues that this representation of the landscape is used as a device to reflect and support themes of violence and “primal rage” in several prominent literary New Zealand novels, including *Man Alone* by John Mulgan (1939), *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme (1984), *Once Were Warriors* by Alan Duff (1990), “Coming Home in the Dark” (1995) by Owen Marshall, and *Loving Ways* by Maurice Gee (1996) (17). Unquestionably, many of New Zealand’s best-known literary works associate New Zealand landscapes with misery, and even death.

Yet, as I will demonstrate, my selected chick lit texts present the landscape in a different way, with protagonists instead finding peace, solace, and comfort from nature amid comic and irreverent descriptions of life in small town New Zealand. Instead, the depiction of New Zealand geographical settings in these novels can be read as a realisation of a “Pastoral Paradise”, to use Lawrence Jones’s term (“Versions of the Dream” 187). Jones uses this phrase to describe the aspirational

characteristics of the Colonial Period of New Zealand literature, suggesting writers “dreamed” of transforming the land into a rural idyll, explaining that later writers such as John Mulgan, Allen Curnow, and Frank Sargeson exposed this dream as a failure and a myth (198-199). This conception of New Zealand landscapes omits the difficult process by which the native bush was converted into agricultural land. However, in my selected New Zealand chick lit novels, the myth of the Pastoral Paradise lives on and is framed not as a dream, but as a reality of contemporary life in New Zealand regardless of whether or not the protagonists are living in rural townships or big cities.

Pastoral settings have long been associated with romantic narratives (Lincoln 1). New Zealand popular fictions of past and present continue this tradition. For example, romance novelist Essie Summers wrote stories “always set in New Zealand, mostly on sheep stations with spectacular lake and alpine scenery” and that appealed to readers through “her deeply nostalgic, conservative image of ‘real New Zealand’ imagined as the fulfilment of the early pioneering dream” (Sturm, “Summers, Essie”). Mary Scott’s romantic comedies likewise feature farm settings, additionally contrasting them with New Zealand city locations. Consequently, “The contexts of Scott’s fictions invariably invite recognition of ‘two cultures’ in New Zealand – rural and urban – reinforcing values of backblock rural communities in anti-materialist terms” (Sturm and Stachurski). My selected texts reproduce these settings to similar effects in an inversion of the favoured locations of British and North American chick lit.

The texts in my sample emphasise rural landscapes as desirable through their contrast to urban cityscapes. The opposing connotations of country and city settings have been identified by Raymond Williams:

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered an idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. (1)

Evidently, these different ideas about country and city locations are immensely enduring. Williams also explains that different values are assigned to the different types of work typical of the city and the country respectively, noting the “separation between mental and manual labour, between administration and operation, between politics and social life” (304). My selected texts reproduce the idealised attributes of country and emphasise the apparently negative aspects of the city described above. Accordingly, they favour physically laborious occupations over the seemingly pretentious work of city characters, as discussed in relation to characters’ chosen careers in the previous chapters. The depiction of settings in these novels ultimately reinforces rural lifestyles as desirable and the countryside as a place of community and romance.

One of the most prominent settings in my selected texts is the rural township, often associated with farming and agricultural landscapes. In *Dinner at Rose’s*, the opening of the novel immediately establishes the setting as rural when Rose’s house is described as “the original homestead of a station long since split into several smaller farms ... utterly charming but decayed beyond repair” (2-3). This house, where Jo lives for much of the novel, is ten kilometres away from where she works in the fictional small town of Waimanu. In te reo Māori, Waimanu means “water bird”,

though the significance of this name or its translation is never explained by Hawkins. Many real New Zealand places have Māori names made up of similarly descriptive components, such as the central North Island region of Waikato (which translates literally as “water flow” and means “flowing waters”), and the Banks Peninsula bay Wainui (which translates literally as “water large” and means “large waters”). Consequently, the naming of Waimanu in this novel fictionally replicates familiar place names and locates this small town in New Zealand. The somewhat superficial inclusion of Māori elements in my selected texts will be explored in depth in my discussion of cultural settings, but I will concentrate first on the particular depiction of this setting in *Dinner At Rose’s*:

Waimanu is in the middle of the King Country, about halfway down the western side of New Zealand’s North Island. It’s only a little place, run-down and distinctly lacking in café culture, but it services a large area of farmland. Consequently, although you can’t buy a pair of shoes any self-respecting woman under a hundred and ten would even *consider* wearing, it has a base hospital, a decent sized supermarket, an enormous Farmlands store and a freezing works. (11, italics in original)

As such, Waimanu is cast as an ordinary small town in rural New Zealand. This excerpt affectionately mocks Waimanu’s lack of sophistication for comic effect, ultimately casting it as a practical place that effectively serves the surrounding farming community. As such, this setting complements Jo’s pragmatic, down to earth and unpretentious personality, and exemplifies the ways in which the conventional urban settings of British and North American chick lit are cast aside in order to appeal to readers of these New Zealand texts.

Likewise, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* the countryside setting is established early in the first chapter, while also introducing the centrality of rugby to the narrative when Helen first meets Mark at a party: “You just don’t expect to find random All Blacks loitering behind the fire stations of small rural Waikato townships” (5). The majority of the story is located in this fictional town, which is named Broadview. On one level, the name “Broadview” refers literally to the apparently scenic views of this rural area. However, it can also be read as an ironic indication that the town amenities – and indeed the residents – are perhaps the opposite of broad in their offerings and their views respectively, humorously hinting at the parochial attitudes often associated with small towns. This impression is extended by this description of the township:

Your choices, if you want to go out for a drink in downtown Broadview, are fairly limited. There’s the Returned Servicemen’s Association, where the average age of the patrons is somewhere over eighty and you can get roast hogget (which really means very old cull ewe) and boiled mix veg from five pm on Tuesdays for \$12.95, or the Broadview Hotel, where the serious drinkers lurk and where, twenty-odd years ago, a man shot his straying wife at point-blank range with a shotgun. (14)

As in *Dinner at Rose’s*, the depiction of the village is recognisable and comic, highlighting the lack of sophisticated dining options in Broadview. This extract also emphasises the famous – if dated – scandals of the local community for comic effect. This alludes to the “New Zealand Gothic” mode, although in a light hearted and mocking way. The gothic mode has been recognised as characteristic of many small towns in both cinema and literary New Zealand texts, such as Vincent Ward’s *Vigil*

(1984), Maurice Gee's *In My Father's Den* (1972), and Ronald Hugh Morrieson's *The Scarecrow* (1963). Lawn explains that "By virtue of its fascination with the borders between categories – life/death, sanity/madness, domesticity/monstrosity" (14), the gothic mode is consistent with the brooding cultural nationalist take on landscape and culture present in many of New Zealand's literary novels discussed above, and the "man alone" myth discussed in the previous chapter. The above extract from *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* frames this old shooting in the Broadview Hotel as typically provincial and humorous – even as it alludes to the possibility of violence between men and women. In doing so, Hawkins clearly situates the novel in the kinds of taste distinctions that Bourdieu discusses, casting it as "light" rather than "heavy" (468), and as humorous rather than serious. At the same time, it makes it plain that this novel is a different kind of New Zealand fiction than the cultural nationalist novels. The evocation of these well-known sinister resonances of the rural setting in this light-hearted way reassures readers that this is a chick lit novel in tone, not a piece of dark rural tragedy. As such, this blends the comedy essential to the chick lit genre with traditions of New Zealand literature and their associated myths, further demonstrating how my selected texts are the product of these two influences.

A fictional small town is also the predominant setting in *Divine*. Divine is also the name chosen for this location, which carries obvious connotations of being heavenly, much like the term "Godzone" does as a colloquial nickname for New Zealand.²⁰ Early in the novel, Holman explains that the town was given this name by one of the first Pākehā settlers in this area:

²⁰ Irish born Thomas Bracken documented his love for New Zealand, and particularly his appreciation of the landscape, in a poem titled "God's Own Country", in the late 19th century. The Prime Minister of the time, Richard Seddon, adopted this phrase for

Sarah had gazed at the lush green bush and broad sweep of the river and announced, ‘Henry, this place has been touched by a divine hand.’

Which was how the town of Divine got its name. (12)

This reaffirms this landscape as idyllic, and an ideal place for the characters to live. Despite this explicit reference to the settlement of New Zealand, it conveniently omits the process by which this “lush green bush” was transformed into a controlled, agricultural area serviced by a rural township. Sarah is also linked to the present, because like Tara she married into the Whitehead family, and so a family lineage connects these women as well as their experiences of this setting. Sarah came to Divine from England, while Tara came from Auckland, and as such they both have to adjust to this new landscape, albeit in different historical periods. The contemporary depiction of this setting is explicitly cast as typical of the countryside, and recognisable to New Zealand readers:

Divine looked much the same as any other small rural town in New Zealand. There were no traffic lights, but a roundabout covered in flowers lay at each end of the main street. Outside the town hall stood a clock tower and war memorial, and beside that was a village green with the police station at one end and the office of the local paper, the Divine Flyer, at the other ... There was one pub, the Long Drop Pub and Sports Bar, one supermarket, and a racecourse five kilometres outside of town. (73)

his speeches, which has more recently been abbreviated to “Godzone” in a colloquial nickname for New Zealand (Hepözden 14–15). This term briefly appears in both *Knotted* and *Blackpeak Station*, connoting the beauty of “nature”, and evoking the impression that New Zealand is an exceptional, favoured, and divine country.

Evidently, rural small towns are a favoured setting in my selected texts, and they share similar descriptions of the local amenities that draw on myths about New Zealand cultural identity through references to sports, drinking, and war. In this way, the conventional settings of British and North American chick lit are adapted and revised for a local readership.

One reason why small country towns feature so prominently in these novels may be that they are framed as places of community, enabling the protagonists to remain socially connected. In British and North American chick lit, the typically glamorous cosmopolitan environment facilitates the characters' full social lives, known as their "urban family" (Harzewski, *Chick lit and Postfeminism* 63). In my selected texts, rural community settings also fulfil this function (albeit in a less cosmopolitan manner). However, their proximity to countryside landscapes additionally allows the protagonists to develop and maintain a deeper relationship with "nature", an aspect of these novels I will discuss in due course. Living in these areas also facilitates the protagonists' romantic relationships, because the love interests of these novels are often farmers living and working in and around such settings. Accordingly, these settings are inextricably linked to the characterisation and embodiment of "New Zealandness" in the protagonists and central love interests in these novels, discussed in the previous chapters. Consequently, these featured rural townships have a material impact on the story, and like the cosmopolitan and urban locations typical of British and North American chick lit, create an "atmosphere of possibility" (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* 30), certainly for romance. As such, this fulfils the genre's blend of contemporary women's realities and fantasies, suggesting that the particular fantasies of the implied readers of these novels

incorporate aspects of British and North American chick lit as well as established myths about New Zealand cultural identity.

These settings are also presented as being worth preserving, even though small-town life is often mocked within my selected texts. One subplot of *Divine* centres on the proposed development and subdivision of the area, which is met with protest from the community and is ultimately rejected. Gil's sentiments reflect the nature of the opposition:

Gil had no intention of selling his farm. He loved it too much, and the thought of some of the most productive farmland in the country being turned into lifestyle blocks littered with white-painted post-and-rail fences and architect-designed houses was anathema to him. There was also the issue of how the local infrastructure would cope with the added pressure on sewerage, water, drainage and road systems in

Barney got his way and managed to rush things through council. (44)

In this extract, readers are encouraged to identify with Gil's point of view, and reject the lifestyle block proposed by Barney Bigelow. Later it is revealed: "Barney had no intention of building houses on his land; it had always been earmarked for a shopping mall" (332). The elderly residents of the Divine retirement home, Peacehaven, discover Barney's fraud and expose him to the local community, and the development is stopped. This minor storyline promotes the preservation of a pastoral, rural lifestyle as important to the characters, emphasising it as their preferred environment. It also illustrates how attitudes to land are used as a means of characterisation, whereby Barney is cast as greedy and money-hungry, while Gil and the Peacehaven residents are framed as community minded conservationists. This reinforces the aforementioned negative associations assigned to profit-driven values and corporate

careers in these novels, which distinguish my selected texts from typical British and North American chick lit.

In *Blackpeak Station*, the rural township setting is not included. Instead, a different farming environment provides the main location for the novel. Blackpeak Station is a fictional high country sheep station located in the Mackenzie Basin of the South Island. Although not in a village setting, a sense of high-country solidarity and friendship remains a key component of this novel. This is a consequence of all the staff living and working together between the homestead and the shearers' quarters, and the occasional visits by characters from neighbouring stations. For instance, after a day mustering, Charlotte and the other staff relax: "Charlotte greeted the cold can of beer Matt handed her like a long lost friend. She could see Carr and his dogs coming down the beat now, and she bet Rex wasn't far behind" (76). As such, this setting is far from isolated – at least socially – with Ford instead creating an impression of collaboration and community. The alpine landscape is depicted as beautiful, but treacherous terrain for farming:

The track was narrow and rocky, dropping steeply even in these relatively tame descendants of the mountains beyond. Behind her, a thick fur of tussock stretched up and over the bones of the alps, the tawny hills spread like a jumble of lions dozing under the thin spring sun. She could almost hear the snow melting on the tops. (7-8)

As such, this setting is "wilder" than the agricultural ideal, and is in tension with Charlotte's aim of producing high quality sheep and wool in this difficult territory. The description of the track as "narrow and rocky" frames it as harsh and potentially dangerous, implying that in order to farm this land, Charlotte must be determined and skilful.

This echoes themes of pioneering and mastery of the landscape present in some earlier New Zealand literature, identified by Lawrence Jones, who argues that “Colonial writers saw the tussock-land of the South Island or the bush of the North Island primarily as an obstacle” (“Versions of the Dream” 188). Similarly, Christina Stachurski argues that John Mulgan’s *Man Alone* “is a late-colonial text focusing on the conquest of the land” (2). Bell claims that “Pakehas’ growing relationship with the land quickly became a component of national identity constructs” (*Inventing New Zealand* 5), explaining that conceptions of New Zealand became associated with “the physical and masculine: man against the elements, man transforming nature into nation” (37). As such, dominion over the landscape is an idea more usually associated with male characters than the female protagonists of a chick lit novel. *Blackpeak Station* offers an updated representation of this trope of New Zealand literature, although it is the only novel in my selection to do so. The agricultural and village environments featured in the other selected texts have already been “mastered”, and so this tension between the difficulties of the landscape and the characters’ desire or need to cultivate and farm is not included. Of the station, Charlotte further observes: “It wasn’t for everyone, this country – and just as well. Too many eyes could suck the soul out of a landscape, reduce it to postcard size” (173). Although this setting continues to be framed as beautiful, this excerpt indicates that it is in danger of losing its “soul” if it becomes over exposed, casting the land as even more special, with access only granted to a privileged few. As such, the portrayal of settings in each of my selected texts clearly departs from the cosmopolitan locations characteristic of the genre and incorporates elements of existing myths about landscape in New Zealand, while also adapting these aspects to facilitate the social relationships essential to chick lit narratives. In doing so, the authors appeal to the fantasies of the implied readers of

these novels, constructing a fictional world where rural New Zealand is romantic and beautiful, rather than hostile and dangerous.

The rural settings in my selected texts are reinforced as ideal places for the characters to live through their contrast to city locations. In *Blackpeak Station*, the predominant rural setting and lifestyle is contrasted with city living when Charlotte and the other staff from the station travel to Canterbury for the Christchurch Agricultural and Pastoral Show.²¹ She and Rex, the station's head shepherd, wake early because they are used to the early starts when working on the farm. Taking in the quiet of the morning, Rex comments to Charlotte: "These townies sleep away the best part of the day" (134). This casts the city lifestyle as "other", oppositional to that of the high country. This also implies a contrast between the work of country and city characters, in which rural occupations are framed as being authentic, fulfilling, close to nature, and productive. Meanwhile, the city characters sleeping in are cast as lazy by comparison. City life is most explicitly cast as undesirable when Charlotte passes through Sydney on a trip to an Australian farm to learn more about its operations:

As for the three-day layover in Sydney the Sammartinos had landed them with – how did anyone think in a place like that? Okay, so the rooftop pool was nice, but there weren't enough potted palms in the world to screen out that much chaos. It wasn't until the Mackenzie Country opened up under her wheels that she'd felt she could breathe again. (274)

²¹ This is better known as the A&P show. The inclusion of this show, along with other recognisable aspects and events relating to New Zealand popular culture will be explored in 3.2.

This portrays Sydney as suffocating and hectic, and rural New Zealand as much more peaceful by comparison. This is somewhat paradoxical, because even as people who live and work in the country are cast as more hardworking – at least physically – than those of cities, being in the countryside is also depicted as being more relaxing. Furthermore, this emphasises the distinctions in most New Zealand-based chick lit between local and overseas, regional and cosmopolitan, rural and urban, reinforcing the former categories as more appealing fantasies for both the characters and the implied readers of these texts.

Dinner at Rose's also presents its small town setting of Waimanu in contrast to a large Australian city, where Jo has been living and working until recently. Matt dryly asks Jo when she arrives back in her hometown:

‘Do you think you’ll be able to handle the hustle and bustle of Waimanu?’

‘I hope so.’ Three weeks ago I had been living in inner city Melbourne; Waimanu has a population of four thousand. ‘It was a bit of a shock to see you’ve got a MacDonald’s.’

‘I know,’ said Matt. ‘We’re practically a metropolis.’ (6-7)

Melbourne has a population of over four million, roughly equivalent to the total population of New Zealand. Matt’s exaggerated description of Waimanu as “practically a metropolis” casts this township as the antithesis of city living in a comic quip reminiscent of the laconic Kiwi Bloke figure. The dramatic contrast between Jo’s living circumstances is also evident through her conversation with her friend Cheryl, who insists that Jo go flatting rather than live alone, concluding:

Anyway, you can't move from the middle of Melbourne to downtown Waimanu and live by yourself in someone's farm cottage. You'll go into a decline and slit your wrists. (14)

Although hyperbolic, this illustrates that Jo might find this transition depressing, particularly if she spends a lot of time on her own. This refers to the apparently narrow-minded, provincial, isolated – and even suicidal – underbelly of small town New Zealand, but retains a darkly comic tone. Following Cheryl's advice, Jo does not live alone, and she remains strongly connected to her family, her annoying but good-natured flatmates, and develops a romantic relationship with Matt, showing that ultimately, Waimanu is an ideal place for Jo to live. Hawkins also makes it clear that living here gives Jo greater access to natural beauty: "I had forgotten, living in the city, about winter nights like this where the stars wing in blazing arcs across the sky and the air is sharp and crisp" (186). Consequently, this rural environment is framed as especially beautiful in comparison to the comparatively cosmopolitan Melbourne. Furthermore, the move away from the city setting favoured and idealised in British and North American chick lit to rural New Zealand is depicted as a positive character development, suggesting that the implied readers of these novels are likely to share this preference.

The tensions between town and country settings are also seen in *Divine*, which presents its eponymous rural village in contrast to Auckland city. Country residents' disparaging attitudes towards people from cities are displayed when Tara arrives in *Divine*, and the locals stereotype her as:

A Dorklander – just what they needed. Auckland was to New Zealand what London was to England and California was to America: it was where the rest of the country liked to pretend all the extravagant rich

fruitcakes lived, as anybody living south of the Bombay Hills took great delight in pointing out to any Jafa (Just Another Fucking Aucklander) who strayed south. For their part, most Aucklanders neither noticed nor cared. (39)

This demonstrates this rural community's collective mockery of anyone they see as pretentious. However, Tara is originally from Henderson (22), a suburb of west Auckland. She is described as having a "wild Westie streak" (64), in a reference to the Westie stereotype associated with this part of Auckland.²² This part of Tara's personality was suppressed in the early years of her marriage to Richard when they moved to Auckland's North Shore, an area associated with wealth and leisure, antithetical to the Westie stereotype. Readers familiar with Auckland and the accompanying stereotypes associated with these suburbs are able to recognise these connotations, although they are not essential to the novel as a whole. When Tara moves to Divine, her previously contained feisty personality re-emerges, seen when Tara argues with her ex-husband: "I'm reverting to my wild Westie roots" (166). This implies that being a Westie, rather than a North Shore resident, involves a kind of authenticity and lack of pretension that enables Tara to adapt more easily to her new home in rural New Zealand. Some time after her move she reflects that: "Over the past few months she had wrested back control of her life" (283). As such, Tara's geographical movements reflect her character development, as her move out of Auckland coincides with the rediscovery of her independence and personal strength,

²² Te Ara the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand defines a "Westie" as:

someone living in West Auckland. The stereotype is a male working-class Pākehā, who is macho, lawless, and lacks taste ... elsewhere in New Zealand, the term is 'bogans'. (McClure)

discussed in Chapter One. As such this novel constructs a rather different fantasy for New Zealand readers than the one shaped by the urban locations typically featured in the genre.

City locations are also included in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*. However, this novel does not overtly cast cities as inferior to the predominant rural setting of the novel. While Helen lives in rural Broadview, the central love interest in this novel lives in Auckland. Staying briefly in Mark's town house, they take a day-trip to the West Coast together, observing the beauty of this setting: "the sea was a deep purplish-blue in the sunlight and the breakers a lovely clear green, edged with white foam" (181-182). This indicates that although Auckland is New Zealand's most densely populated city, its close proximity to beaches gives the characters regular access to the natural environment. References to real cities in my selected texts also include particular details that are recognisable to New Zealand readers. For example, when a group of Helen's friends are watching one of Mark's rugby games on television, Hamish sarcastically comments about the weather: "'I see it's another lovely evening in Wellington,' he continued, looking idly at the screen as the rain and the haka began simultaneously" (109). This humorously evokes recollections of Wellington's reputation for stormy weather, creating a comic moment for readers familiar with the city.

Unlike many of the other protagonists in my sample of texts, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* Helen leaves the rural setting of Broadview in the conclusion of the novel. She, Mark, and their baby move to Auckland, which is where he is based due to his contracts with the provincial Blues rugby team and the national All Blacks team. In the epilogue, Helen explains: "After the World Cup we moved into a big, rambling, single-storey house in Grey Lynn" (359). Readers familiar with Auckland

understand the connotations associated with this now affluent and upwardly mobile suburb. It is known for its wooden villas that have escalated in price (Boyle), but are not as ostentatious as the established mansions of Remuera and the nouveau North Shore. Helen's move indicates that though she has a strong connection to the rural environment, particularly through her job as a large animal vet (in which she cares for and treats livestock), her desire to be with Mark is more compelling, and she is prepared to move for love. Although this requires Helen to leave her hometown (and contrasts with the situation in *Blackpeak Station*, in which Rob moves for love), this is largely a pragmatic decision. Mark's work requires him to be in Auckland, and if Helen stayed in Broadview, she would hardly see him and she would have to look after their baby by herself for much of the time. Moving to Auckland means that she gains both Mark's company, and practical support. So although this could be read as a major sacrifice on Helen's part or as the characters demonstrating a preference for city locations, this move ultimately reflects their pragmatic considerations, rather than the allure of city life. As such, this novel prioritises the romance fantasy – an indispensable element of the genre – over the mythic rural New Zealand lifestyle, suggesting that readers will sympathise with this inclination.

Knotted is the only novel in my selection to be almost entirely set in Auckland. Yet even in this novel, despite its being located in a busy urban setting, descriptions of the city focus more on the surrounding landscape and natural scenery rather than the appearance of the cityscape. For example, from Danny's kitchen window: "the view was magnificent. Acres of rolling green pasture with a few clusters of trees swept away to the distant cliffs" (49). This clearly evokes a rural rather than a metropolitan impression. The novel does not specify which Auckland suburb Danny lives in, and although it is the city, her lifestyle seems antithetical to the

urban settings typically found in British and North American chick lit. Danny's Auckland property is further aligned with rural – even agricultural – settings in this description of her back garden:

Some tumbledown sheds constructed from red, rusting iron stood beneath large evergreen trees at the back of the garden area. Chickens pecked the ground outside the larger of the sheds, and a couple of fat, fleecy sheep – one black and one white – grazed beneath a washing line full of clothes, revolving slowly in the wind as the long, green grass flattened and tossed in a constant, undulating wave. (49)

The presence of these particular animals, especially those associated with farming, rather than typical domestic companion animals such as cats or dogs, retains a relationship to the romanticised rural lifestyle so prominent in my selected texts, implying that even in this New Zealand city, the “natural” world (or at least that version of it that is persistently associated with farming in these novels) is integral to a fulfilling daily life.

Similarly, as Danny and Ross run errands in town, it is the natural environment that draws their attention, rather than descriptions of the city, which barely feature in the novel, if at all. On their way to the supermarket:

Their route took them past beaches that sparkled in the spring sunshine. A few people walked their dogs or strolled along the water's edge, but the beaches were largely deserted. Boats of all sizes were moored in some of the bays they passed by. (60)

As such, features of the landscape are integrated into their daily activities and chores. The inclusion of people walking their dogs on the beach, and boats moored in the various bays explicitly negates the sense of a bustling, dense population typical of

British and North American chick lit, and extends the impression of a lifestyle connected to the environment, outdoor activities, and recreation on an everyday basis. So, although this setting is different from the rural, agricultural landscapes depicted in the other novels, it still offers an idealistic version of being “close to nature” for both the characters and the implied readers of this novel. On the phone to his sister in America, Ross describes New Zealand as: “[b]eautiful,” adding “[i]f I had the time, I’d spend a few weeks just driving around” (79). This reflects Ross’s increasing enthusiasm for New Zealand as he begins the process of becoming “an honorary Kiwi” (315) as discussed in the previous chapter.

Evidently, although the characters in my selected texts occasionally live in or visit city settings, scenic descriptions of “natural” landscapes are emphasised. As a result, the characters’ relationship to the environment is depicted as a central, often healing, presence in their lives. In *Knotted*, the beauty of the landscape is also framed as a calming influence on Danny when she and Ross go away together while they wait for her biopsy results, which will determine whether she has breast cancer.

The Bay of Islands was a magical place with its pale jade waters, pretty islands and golden beaches fringed by pohutukawa trees with their scarlet blooms ... It was idyllic and provided just the kind of rest the doctor had ordered. (363)

This seaside holiday destination, though distinct from rural, agricultural, and city settings, reproduces another romanticised version of “nature”. It is clear that this environment has a positive effect on Danny’s stress levels and emotional wellbeing. Along with the inclusion of her pseudo-rural garden, these elements accommodate the emphasis on an idealised, pastoral style of nature that is typical of my selected texts.

Returning to the predominantly rural settings of my selected texts, *Blackpeak Station* also casts the beauty of this landscape as an emotionally restorative and soothing influence on Charlotte. She is devastated in the wake of her break up with her fiancé Luke, who had secretly been planning to develop the property into a commercial enterprise. Encouraged by her friend and fellow shepherd Jennifer, they go horse riding together, and Charlotte observes:

From Archie's back, the world did look a little less grey. No one could help but notice that it was a beautiful afternoon out here. The alps had got a fresh dusting of snow overnight and stood sharply against the deep autumn sky. A breeze was running down from the mountains, barely stirring the grass, but cutting the heat of the sun. (252)

Charlotte's impression that the world looks brighter and less bleak when out riding in the scenic Mackenzie Basin implies that being in this environment is therapeutic, and somewhat alleviates her stress. Later in the novel, Charlotte looks out at the landscape on what would have been her wedding day to Luke:

Charlotte looked around – at the river fanned out below the terrace cliffs, the shingle screes cutting the hills, the glacier lost in low cloud over her shoulder. Sooner or later, fast or slow, everything moved on. (266)

In this excerpt, the geological processes of the land over many millions of years give Charlotte comfort, as she reflects how individual pieces of rock, ice, and water are transformed and changed, mirroring her own progress as she recovers from Luke's betrayal. The slow evolution of the landscape contrasts with the fast-paced city lifestyles prevalent in British and North American chick lit, further exemplifying the

ways my selected texts evolve and adapt conventions of the genre for a New Zealand readership.

Likewise, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Helen's relationship to nature is cast as peaceful, and even spiritual, seen when she and Mark lie together under a tree on her lawn in rural Broadview:

‘It’s beautiful,’ I said, reaching for his hand. The late afternoon light filtered softly down through young red-gold leaves and gave each one its own personal halo. Lying under a copper beech in springtime and looking up gives me the awestruck feeling otherwise achieved by visiting the cathedrals of Europe, but for considerably less exertion and expense. (113)

This excerpt presents an explicit comparison with a European, urban experience in a way that favours the “natural” New Zealand location. But the copper beech tree is also known as the European beech, so while this extract highlights the aesthetic beauty of the tree, it is not unique to New Zealand, or even necessarily to the countryside. As such, there's also a – perhaps unintentional – hint that this romanticised version of “nature” is itself, in fact, imported. As such, the idealistic myths of landscape reproduced in my selected texts are heavily constructed and transplanted from elsewhere, mirroring the ways that these novels are themselves engaged in the importation and adaptation of the chick lit genre for a local New Zealand readership.

In *Dinner at Rose's*, Jo's strong connection with and appreciation of nature also casts this rural setting as desirable. Early in the text, Jo is compelled to go for a walk by the beauty of her surroundings:

Outside the sky was pale lemon and green, and I could hear a disconcerting snuffling sound that I hoped was being made by the piglet. I got up and went to look – it was, and the mist wreathing up off the bush-clad hills behind the house was so lovely that I threw on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and went out to commune with nature. (8-9)

Although I do not read the specific choice of words “to commune with nature” as being entirely in earnest, this extract nevertheless suggests that Jo’s connection to this place is special, and that she enjoys walking in the bush. This is particularly notable, because it is one of the few instances in my selected texts that depicts a protagonist engaging with an apparently “wild”, un-manipulated, and non-agricultural landscape. In its very unusualness, this example suggests that the omission of native bush landscapes in most of my selected texts is due to the conventions of chick lit. On her walk, Jo does not stray too far from the rural town setting, which crucially facilitates the social connections and romantic relationships essential to the genre. The exclusion of these bush landscapes also distances these popular and light-hearted novels from some acclaimed New Zealand literary novels, which as discussed, associate being alone in the bush with misery and despair.

Jo’s connection with nature is also depicted as a healing presence in her life. As she takes in a view of the mountains, they offer her some respite from her troubles:

It was indeed *crap* that Aunty Rose was dying and I no longer had the right to call this place home, and Matt didn’t want me, but somehow mountains do tend to restore your sense of perspective. They are so enduring and grandiose and indifferent that your fleeting human troubles seem very unimportant in comparison. (227)

As such, Jo's relationship to nature enables her to – quite literally – see the bigger picture. Rather than encoding connotations of intimidation and danger, as in the “hostile landscapes” (Evans 147) commonly featured in the literary New Zealand novels of the colonial nationalist period, this text casts mountains as steadfast and reliable. As such, this setting is depicted as a place of geographical beauty, peace, and ideal for reflection.

In *Divine*, Tara's relationship to the landscape is also depicted as important. The apparent beauty of the natural environment is framed as a restorative influence as she recovers from her heartbreak over the end of her marriage:

The spot was hauntingly beautiful. Tall, glossy ferns with fronds curled tight as a newborn's fist sat alongside khaki green and red-streaked flax and strands of toetoe grass. (75)

This casts the plant life as picturesque, also including toetoe and ferns that are native to New Zealand. Consequently, although this landscape is on the farm where Tara is living, this particular part of the property is not a typical agricultural setting. The comparison between fern fronds and “a newborn's fist” frames these elements of nature as fragile and innocent, rather than hostile or dangerous. The landscape is explicitly depicted as healing later in this episode:

Tara sat for a long time, watching the river slide gently by and letting the place work its magic on her agitated soul. The lush fecund beauty of the Waikato seeped into her pores, stroking a gentle finger along her tortured, knotted nerves. (75-76)

As such, this place has a soothing, positive effect on Tara's state of mind. The specific restorative beauty of the New Zealand landscape is further emphasised:

For a little while things almost made sense. Auckland seemed a long way off. Through the soles of her gumboots, Tara felt the silent heartbeat of these three stunningly beautiful islands tucked away at the bottom of the earth, cradled by the Pacific Ocean. The heartbeat of the land kept rhythm with her solitary, lonely heart. People would come and go, but the land would always endure. (76)

Temporarily, Tara is a woman alone, and the landscape is emphasised as solid and uncomplicated, in contrast to Tara's own complex relationships and state of mind. This extract also suggests that New Zealand is special, and "tucked away" from the rest of the world, creating the impression of a land removed from the implied chaos of elsewhere. Accordingly, New Zealand is affirmed as a desirable place for the characters, and readers of this novel to live.

Evidently, the inclusion of these characters' relationships to an idealised version of nature is consistent across my selected texts, and further sets them apart from the protagonists of typical British and North American chick lit. The above examples demonstrate that a strong relationship to nature is depicted as occupying a particular place in the New Zealand protagonists' psychological and emotional makeup. This goes a long way to explaining these texts' preference for rural townships, farms, or seaside settings, because their proximity to apparently "natural" landscapes facilitates this connection.

The protagonists' relationships to nature also reproduce popular understandings of "New Zealand cultural identity", to use Belich and Wevers' term (1). They argue: "[t]he environment and how you live in it is a constant theme of what it means to be Kiwi" (6). More acutely, they explain: "Pakeha New Zealanders tend to have a strong, if mythic, connection to a rural society or imagined versions of it, and

(perhaps contradictorily) to an unspoilt landscape” (6). The emphatic re-enchantment with small communities, rural landscapes and descriptions of nature in my selected texts implies a contemporary enthusiasm for these mythologised environments among readers. My selected texts certainly present “imagined versions” of these landscapes, appealing to this sensibility – but also conceal that such settings are in fact culturally produced. Nevertheless, their inclusion illustrates yet another way these New Zealand chick lit novels adapt the genre for a local readership.

These representations of New Zealand landscapes align with the tourism and marketing imagery used to promote the country as a potential destination for international travel. As early as 1898, New Zealand became the first country to feature landscape scenery on postage stamps (Alsop 90). Vintage poster expert Nicholas D. Lowry argues that the natural landscape was the primary feature of many illustrations and posters that were historically used as marketing material for tourism. He explains that 1920s and 1930s artists:

forewent presenting formulated lifestyle impressions like their European counterparts. Instead, their posters proudly depicted location, location, location. The only attitude to be found was the attitude of the outdoors: a rugged, adventure filled, natural wonderland with no pretence. (Lowry et al. 87)

This could easily have been written about my selected New Zealand chick lit texts, where as argued, metropolitan settings and cosmopolitan lifestyles are rejected in favour of depictions of the “natural” environment. Bell also writes of the way nature imagery is deployed: “New Zealanders’ national pride is stimulated by the same beauty and uniqueness that is sold to tourists: a reinterpretation and revaluing of that which is familiar, glossier on the brochures than in everyday reality, and removed

from any context that might detract from the splendour” (*Inventing New Zealand* 41). Consequently, idealistic impressions of the New Zealand landscape are not just reserved for the purposes of international promotion. They “sell the dream” to New Zealanders who already live here, reinforcing the myth identified by Bell: that “nature is central to the way of life for New Zealanders” (*Inventing New Zealand* 41). As such, the geographical settings of my selected texts reproduce this illusion.

The representation of the predominantly rural settings of these novels is also somewhat dualistic. On one hand, my selected texts mock the perceived parochialism of small town New Zealand (in this way they are more self-aware and ironic than the earlier works of Essie Summers and Mary Scott), whilst also proclaiming these settings as ideal places for the characters to live. This reflects Belich and Wevers’ position that New Zealanders are both “anguished about who and what we are, and expressing our uncertainties about provincialism and unwillingness to praise; and at the same time optimistically at ease in the world, sure we come from ‘Godzone’” (11-12). In effect, the representations of geographical settings in my selected texts reflect this view. I contend that the inclusion of these settings’ apparent parochialism is largely self-deprecating and comic. This has a tempering effect, moderating the otherwise sentimental and wholly positive depiction of rural New Zealand. But even as these texts mock provincial New Zealand small towns, such settings are affirmed as desirable.

Ultimately, the settings featured in my selected texts are vastly differently from those typically found in British and North American chick lit, and also from some New Zealand literary works which frame the landscape as hostile, dangerous and isolated, or as a challenge to be conquered. Although many of these texts often frame city environments as undesirable places to live, the few protagonists that do

live there retain a strong relationship to nature and, in the case of *Knotted*, an apparently rural garden complete with chickens and sheep. As such, New Zealand is depicted as a kind of Pastoral Paradise. In these texts, this is presented not as a dream, but a reality of everyday life in New Zealand. The popularity of these novels reflects an enchantment with these enduring myths about New Zealand, and – as ever – the chick lit genre’s tendency to reflect a fusion of the realities and fantasies of contemporary women. These texts provide readers with an opportunity to temporarily experience New Zealand in this idyllic light, however fanciful it may be.

3.2 CULTURAL SETTINGS

As well as geographical settings, the inclusion of specific and recognisable brands, events, and elements of popular culture in my selected texts also locates these stories in New Zealand. British and North American chick lit typically contains “not only a lot of brand name-dropping, but also a lot of references to pop culture” (Yardley 15). My selected texts reproduce this convention of the genre, but almost exclusively feature New Zealand references, in another example of the ways these novels blend established characteristics of chick lit with local elements of New Zealand cultural identity. Some of these factors are tangible products or businesses, such as Weet-bix, The Warehouse, and Trade Me, while others are common cultural experiences or reference points, such as media coverage of the Rugby World Cup, Agricultural and Pastoral shows, the flat New Zealand accent, and even aspects of Māori culture. In either case, the term “Kiwiana” is useful to examine how these references are deployed in my selected texts. Bell explains: “Kiwiana refers to particular artefacts and images that have been adopted as symbols of nation. They are intended to evoke an instant, positive sense of New Zealand” (“Kiwiana Revisited” 175). As such,

“while these items promote themes of identity, community and nation, they are overlaid with a thick veneer of nostalgia” (Neill 94). My selected texts incorporate such objects of national affection, however contrived, to evoke a warm and occasionally ironic impression of New Zealand cultural identity.

The inclusion of these elements fulfils a range of functions. As well as locating the novels in a distinctly New Zealand cultural setting, they each carry particular connotations. They are frequently used as shorthands to communicate specific and often comic meanings related to characterisation, narrative events or situations, and settings. Of course, this relies on readers’ prior knowledge and preconceived ideas about these icons of popular culture in New Zealand. As Vorhaus explains, this is a critical aspect of successful comedy: “the trick is to make sure that your audience has the same points of reference as you” (5). In doing so, the authors of my selected texts eliminate the need to explicitly explain the connotations of these elements to readers.

Bourdieu’s concept of taste and distinction is useful to discuss how certain elements of “New Zealandness” are used to create specific meanings about characters’ preferences and personalities. The kinds of products they consume give readers a lot of information about the characters’ interests and tastes. According to Grenfell’s discussion of Bourdieu’s work in this area, the way tastes are categorised and the “criteria for judging them ‘higher’ or ‘lower’” (96) exposes the culturally produced nature of these distinctions. As established in the previous chapters, my selected texts repeatedly emphasise practicality, humility, and a lack of pretension as ideal character traits, and readers are encouraged to identify with protagonists that embody them. Accordingly, the New Zealand brands, media products, and events favoured by the protagonists carry different connotations to those chosen by “Mr.

Wrongs”, or the more elite, antagonistic characters. However, in almost all cases, references to these elements of Kiwi culture remain comic and seemingly inconsequential, even as they reinforce conventional understandings of New Zealand cultural identity.

One element of New Zealand identity included in these texts is the language and accents of the characters. In *Dinner at Rose’s*, the stereotypical, flat Kiwi accent is presented for comic effect when Rose (who was born in England and came to New Zealand as a young woman in the 1970s), complains of Matt: “Years of nagging, and he still says ‘New Zullind’ and ‘moolk’” (4). Jo takes this teasing good-naturedly, claiming: “I’m a beastly colonial, Rose, and you’re just going to have to come to terms with it” (4). As such, this episode acknowledges the European settlement of New Zealand, and the perception that occupants of the colonies were unsophisticated and uncivilised in comparison to those of the British homeland (Swarbrick). A New Zealand accent is further emphasised later in the novel: “‘Yeah, g’day,’ said Matt in a low, flat Kiwi drawl specifically designed to provoke his aunt” (145). This enables readers to recognise how Matt sounds, aurally characterising him with a voice particular to New Zealanders. Historically, negativity towards the New Zealand accent has been cast as evidence of “cultural cringe” (McGeorge 16). Stevenson defines cultural cringe as “the view that one’s own national culture is inferior to the cultures of other countries”. Rose’s distaste for the New Zealand accent exemplifies this sensibility. However, it is clear that unlike Rose, Matt and Jo are not embarrassed about their accents, reflecting the more recent argument that cultural cringe has lessened over time (P. Calder). An essential part of the comedy in the above examples from *Dinner at Rose’s* derives from this tension between these familiar attitudes to New Zealand accents, humorously emphasising the generational difference between

these characters, and the playful, teasing tone of their relationship. In this way, recognised aspects and attitudes towards New Zealand accents are incorporated into this chick lit narrative.

Likewise, in *Knotted*, the characters' particular use of language also locates the novel in a New Zealand cultural setting. As in *Dinner at Rose's*, the New Zealand accent is emphasised, highlighted when Danny's niece, Mia, describes talking to her American aunts on the telephone: "She's *so* funny! She calls herself my *ant-ee* and she laughs when I call *her* my *arntie!*" (248). This distinguishes the New Zealand accent from the American one for comic effect. The difference between New Zealand and American terminology is also highlighted when Ross babysits Matt and Mia, who is upset:

Ross wasn't above bribery. 'How about we get a popsicle?'

'A popsicle?' The tears miraculously dried. 'You mean an ice block?'

'If you say so.' (109)

This comically combines the common experience of bribing a child with confectionary and the different names for this frozen treat. Additional use of colloquial language and slang further locates this novel in New Zealand. This is made explicit when Danny experiences road rage in the opening chapter:

Danny looked through the side window of the truck at the yellow-hatted workman and mouthed a classic New Zealand salutation. *Bite your bum.* (12, author's own italics)

This phrase is explicitly cast as a New Zealand expression, deploying local slang for the readers' amusement. This implies that "classic" New Zealand language is colloquial, informal, and occasionally, mildly offensive. It also suggests that New

Zealand characters speak as they find, rather than concern themselves with excessive politeness, enabling readers to vicariously experience this freedom.

Knotted also includes the use of Māori terms. At the supermarket, Ross holds up a vegetable he had not seen before, and Danny explains that it is:

“A Kumara.”

“A...what-a-wa?”

“A koo-mah-rah – Maori sweet potato” (61)

This phonetically demonstrates the correct pronunciation of this vegetable, and comically emphasises the cultural clash between Danny and Ross, which lessens as the narrative progresses. This is illustrated by Ross’s speech at the Oscars in the epilogue: “Kia ora to my family in Rotorua, New Zealand. Forgive my pronunciation – it can only get better” (366). As such, Ross’s increased proficiency with Māori terms reflects his integration into New Zealand culture in the one of the most American contexts – an Oscars acceptance speech. This exemplifies the hybridisation of elements of New Zealand identity with the characteristic glamour of British and American chick lit presented in these texts.

The use of language to locate *Knotted* in a New Zealand cultural setting is also seen through Joe, a Māori tradesperson hired by Ross. He uses New Zealand slang, explaining to Ross while working on the bathroom: “This plumbing is pretty old, bro” (108), and later exclaims that Danny’s cake is “choice” (296). These expressions are both included in the *Lonely Planet* glossary of terms: “How to Understand a New Zealander,” with *choice* being defined as “all good” and *bro* being explained as “short for brother, term of friendship used with alarming regularity.” As such, this is informal, colloquial, and affable language familiar to New Zealanders. Joe also functions as a plot device, enabling Danny to reconnect with her Māori family, with

whom she has never had contact because her mother was estranged from Danny's grandparents.

'Where are your people?' Joe asked one day when they took a break from replacing the deck.

'My people?' Danny held out a mug of tea and the last slice of cake that Deryl had made.

'Your whanau – your family.' He took the tea and cake and sat down on a pile of decking. She suddenly understood; Joe was Maori.

'I know what whanau means Joe,' Danny said. 'I don't know where my whanau are. I've never met them.' (295)

Joe says he will ask his mother, who "knows everybody" (296) to help find Danny's grandparents, and when he reports back to Danny he explains that he is her cousin. In terms of the plot, this is convenient, because it puts Danny in touch with her extended family with little effort. It is also significant in terms of Māori understandings of cousins. This is seen when Danny asks Joe if they are first or second cousins, but: "It made no sense to Joe. Pakeha – European New Zealanders – kept track of first, second or third cousins. In the Māori world, you were just cousins" (301).

Subsequently, Danny visits her Māori family in Rotorua, meeting her grandmother, Pania, her grandfather Ted, and her three uncles Henare, Hemi, and Tipene (303).

This is the only text in my sample that features a Māori protagonist. However, Danny's meeting with her family is framed as being fundamentally about gaining their support after being alone for so many years following the deaths of her mother and sister, rather than being presented as a chance to learn more about her Māori culture and heritage. The importance of family is further stressed through the additional support Danny gains from Ross's siblings, and by the end of the novel her

extended family has grown exponentially (365), as discussed in chapter one. As such, it is more significant that she reconnects with her family members than the fact that they are Māori. Nevertheless, *Knotted* brings Māori characters and culture to the foreground, much more so than any of my other selected texts.

Scant references to Māori phrases, characters and place names are also included in *Dinner at Rose's*. As mentioned, the fictional rural town where the novel is set is named "Waimanu" (4), reflecting that many real communities in New Zealand have Māori place names. When Rose's family visit her after she has been to her first chemotherapy treatment, and she welcomes her sister Hazel: "Come through, sweet pea, the whole whānau is here, bless their cotton socks" (71). There is no explanation of the meaning of "whānau", implying that readers of the novel are expected to understand its definition as the Māori term for family. The *Lonely Planet* guide, "How to Understand a New Zealander" lists the word whānau as "part of the New Zealand lexicon regardless of whether or not you're Maori", highlighting that it is a widely recognised term. Later in the novel, when Rose is in the final stages of her illness, her friend Mrs Titoi comes to visit her: "Bonnie Titoi was a plump, charming Maori lady who lived in town" (204). During her visit, she asks Jo: "Please get off that table – it's Tapu. We don't put our bottoms where we put our food, hmmm?" (205). This reference is recognisable to readers who are aware that *tapu* means sacred, and are familiar with this traditional Māori custom. As such, *Dinner at Rose's* also includes elements of Māori culture, which have arguably become part of Pākehā culture as well.

The remaining selected texts pay significantly less attention to Māori culture and characters. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the central love interest in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* has a Māori surname, Tipene, without making any

further mention of Māori culture or language. *Blackpeak Station* entirely omits Māori references. *Divine* includes one. The Whitehead family name, which belonged to the first European settlers in the fictional township, carries a high amount of status among Divine residents as key figures in the establishment of this village:

Being able to claim Whitehead blood mattered a lot in Divine. If you couldn't say you were born one, the next best thing was to marry one. There were some who could truthfully say their family had been in the area before the Whiteheads. Chook quite rightly pointed out that his Maori ancestors had been there way before Sarah and Henry arrived.

(41)

Evidently, while much of the narrative action is centred on the lives of Pākehā New Zealanders, Holman does briefly acknowledge that Māori were the indigenous residents of the area. No further explanation is given, glossing over any potential conflict between these parties.

The benign, often affectionate representation of Māori people and culture in my selected texts is a significant way that these novels synthesise mythologised aspects of New Zealand cultural identity with the conventions of British and North American chick lit. Pointedly, these novels create the impression that there are no racial tensions between Māori and Pākehā characters, suggesting that this appeals to the fantasies of the implied readers of these texts. In reality, disputes over the Treaty of Waitangi, land ownership, and racism continue to affect race relations in New Zealand. These novels' depiction of Māori elements as signifiers of New Zealand cultural identity, omits any suggestion of hostility or conflict, presenting New Zealand

as progressive and bicultural.²³ As Bell argues, “The production of distinctive elements of ‘Kiwi culture’ is a handy bypass of historic tensions, a masking of internal stresses” (“Kiwiana Goes Upmarket” 285). As a result, my selected texts affirm race relations in New Zealand as harmonious, even as they restrict or exclude non-white ethnicities from the narrative. The predominance of “whiteness” has been a criticism of British and North American chick lit. As Ferriss and Young argue: “the overwhelming majority of chick lit continues to focus on a specific age, race, and class: young, white and middle” (8). Lisa A. Guerrero identifies “Sex & the City syndrome, a version of popular ethnocentrism that assumes that women of color don’t exist in urban worlds of glamour” (100). Of course, my selected texts are not concerned with “urban worlds of glamour”, but they are guilty of marginalising Māori culture, with terms, customs, and placenames generally framed as being as significant as parallel references to brands like The Warehouse or the *Woman’s Weekly*.

The New Zealand cultural setting of these novels is further enhanced by the inclusion of real events. This is particularly notable in *Blackpeak Station*. Luke asks if Charlotte will attend the Saturday races with him at Cup and Show Week:²⁴

“It’s Cup Week soon,’ Luke offered at last. ‘Do you come up to Christchurch for that?

‘We usually go up for the Show,’ she told him.

²³ These novels certainly do not depict New Zealand as multicultural. Other than Māori or Pākehā characters, no other ethnicities are represented.

²⁴ Christchurch Cup and Show Week is an annual week of horse racing and the Christchurch Agricultural and Pastoral Show (A&P show), which coincides with the Canterbury Anniversary, a public holiday.

‘Are you one of those people in white coats who lead sheep and cows around the ring?’ (123-124).

This extract indicates Charlotte is referring to an Agricultural and Pastoral “Show”, rather than any other kind of show, such as the theatre or a concert. This relies on readers’ familiarity with this event, while also retaining the strong emphasis on rural lifestyles and activities so prominent in my selected texts. Charlotte expresses her reservations about the races: “I don’t see what all the fuss is about – who’s wearing what, all that kind of thing. The best dressed competitions” (124). In contrast, “Armani-Guy” Luke is enthusiastic about these pursuits, signifying that they are not well suited as a couple. This additionally reinforces the antipathy towards fashion and beauty shared by the protagonists of my selected texts. The February 22nd Christchurch Earthquake is also included in *Blackpeak Station*.²⁵ Crucially, in terms of the narrative, it provides the catalyst for Charlotte’s realisation that she still loves Rob. When she sees his destroyed building on television in “a twisted mess” (280), she does not know if he is safe. Talking to her brother Nick on the phone, she tells him: “The building he works in fell down ... there are people ...” She sobbed. ‘People trapped ... and I can’t get him on his phone’ (282, ellipses in original). The staff at the station are upset, and Charlotte wonders:

Could the rescue teams carry on searching through the night? They were working so hard. But there was so much rubble, and so few of

²⁵ On February 22nd 2011, a magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck Christchurch. The epicenter was located two kilometers from Lyttelton, and had a depth of five kilometers. 185 people died, and damage was widespread throughout the Canterbury region.

them. They must be past exhaustion, now. And still the aftershocks kept coming. (283)

Charlotte is relieved when she finally hears that Rob is alive and unharmed, and their romantic reunion soon follows. The depiction of this event from afar reflects the experiences of many people with loved ones in Christchurch on the day of the earthquake. For a genre classically associated with shopping, dating, and glamour, the earthquake also adds a tragedy to the narrative in a way that cannot be accused of being unrealistic or overly dramatic. The inclusion of these actual New Zealand events is a further way that my selected texts integrate aspects of local culture with the conventions of British and North American chick lit, encouraging the implied readers of these novels to identify with the narrative.

Rugby is another marker of New Zealand identity included in my selected texts. It is only explored in great depth in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, though rugby league gets a brief mention in *Knotted*, when Danny wears “a battered Warriors cap” (326).²⁶ The lack of coverage perhaps relates to the fact that these novels depict conventional women’s fantasies, while rugby is traditionally associated with male fans. This also explains why Mark is cast as an All Black in *Chocolate Cake For Breakfast* – Helen wants to date a rugby player, rather than be one herself, suggesting that the implied readers of these novels also find this appealing. As a result, rugby is highly prominent in this narrative. This extract generally describes the game:

Rugby’s really fairly straightforward – the forwards try to pulverise each other, and then the backs skip lightly through the holes in the

²⁶ The *Warriors* are an Auckland-based Rugby League team (not to be confused with Rugby Union), and is the only New Zealand team to compete in the domestic Australian *National Rugby League* (NRL) competition.

opposition's defence to score the tries. Forwards can score tries, but it's not their key role and they like to pretend it's no big deal. A manly nod of acknowledgement once the ball is placed over the line is acceptable, but victory dances, like fancy hairstyles, are left to the backs. (254)

This explains the general aim of rugby, enabling readers unfamiliar with the sport to follow further descriptions of Mark playing later in the novel. It also aligns rugby with masculinity, and delineates between the “manly” forwards and the “fancy” backs, favouring the modest celebrations of the pack.²⁷ This further demonstrates the complex and careful ways these texts negotiate gender, and masculinity in particular, as discussed in the previous chapters.

Alongside this description of the sport, rugby is also specifically linked to the New Zealand cultural setting. Early in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* it is established that: “[h]alf the little boys in the country dream of growing up to be an All Black” (27), casting this ambition as widely desired (though not by all). This explicitly links playing rugby with conventional understandings of New Zealand masculinities.

Particular details of the New Zealand rugby schedule are also included, seen when Mark explains: “They try to give the guys who played in the Super Rugby final a bit of a rest before the Tri Nations games” (41).²⁸ This relies on readers' familiarity with

²⁷ In rugby union, the pack is made up of the eight “forward” playing positions, made up of a hooker, two props, two locks, two flankers, and a number eight, who link together in a scrum.

²⁸ *Super Rugby* is a southern hemisphere rugby tournament including domestic teams from the nations of New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. As of 2016, two additional teams, one each from Argentina and Japan will also be included. The *Tri*

these tournaments to understand the minimal break between the end of the domestic season and the beginning of the international roster. The New Zealand national obsession with the *Rugby World Cup* tournament is also referenced in this novel, and is cast as an event attracting immense media coverage.²⁹ Helen observes that:

even now, seven months out, the national sporting media seemed incapable of covering any story without slipping in a reference to the likelihood of the world's best rugby team failing once more to win it. The World Cup was starting to feel like a great brooding presence on the horizon, blocking all view of life afterwards. (216)

This demonstrates the importance of the World Cup for fans of rugby. It also implies that Helen sees the media obsession with this tournament as excessive and somewhat ridiculous, suggesting that the implied readers of these novels are likely to identify with this point of view. Nevertheless, its significance is reinforced in the last line of the novel in the epilogue: "Oh, and the All Blacks won the World Cup" (360). This implies that the winning of the *Rugby World Cup* is the ultimate happy ending, appealing to the mythologised national fantasy associated with winning this tournament. In this way, the incorporation of the All Blacks and rugby into this chick lit narrative exemplifies the way my selected texts blend local New Zealand events and experiences with the wider conventions of the genre.

Nations was an international tournament between the national teams of New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa that ran from 1996-2012. The Argentinian rugby team has since been added to the competition, which has been renamed the *Rugby Championship*.

²⁹ The *Rugby World Cup* is an international tournament held every four years.

Aspects of New Zealand media, including real television shows, radio stations, and magazines are also widely included across my selected texts. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, New Zealand reality television is mentioned in passing during the singing of the anthems before an All Blacks game: “A pair of chilly-looking *New Zealand Idol* finalists sang the Australian and New Zealand national anthems, with added quavery bits to prove that they were serious musicians” (53). This comic moment casts these reality contestants as overly enthusiastic and pretentious, reinforcing these traits as undesirable. In *Divine*, Gil is described in reference to a long running New Zealand television show: “Mr Country Calendar swung himself over the fence and dropped onto the race in his big brown scuffed work boots” (65).³⁰ This reference functions as a shorthand that helps to characterise Gil as reminiscent of the Kiwi Bloke figure. There is no explanation or description of *Country Calendar*, and so Holman relies on the readers’ local knowledge of this well-established programme in order to get the comic reference. Another New Zealand television series is also included in this novel when Tara wonders if her sister will record episodes of *Outrageous Fortune* for her: “one of the few things that Tara and Kim shared was a love of the local drama set in West Auckland” (163).³¹ Tara’s fondness for this particular show reflects her own “wild Westie roots” mentioned above, and

³⁰ *Country Calendar* is New Zealand’s longest running television series. It first aired in 1966, and focuses on farming and its accompanying challenges and lifestyle. A notable episode in the context of this thesis focuses on the farm of New Zealand chick lit author Danielle Hawkins and her husband.

³¹ *Outrageous Fortune* is a popular New Zealand television series that ran from 2005-2010. A six-part prequel, *Westside*, aired in 2015, and has been commissioned for a further series.

casts this stereotype as one of national affection. In *Dinner at Rose's*, Jo describes sitting on a “shabby couch watching Shortland Street with my bowl on my knee” (24) as she eats dinner.³² As mentioned, British and North American chick lit frequently includes popular culture references (Yardley 15). Accordingly, as well as highlighting that the characters are engaged with popular local media content, the references to iconic New Zealand television shows in my selected texts also demonstrate how these novels adapt recognised elements of the genre for a local readership.

As well as television media, magazines are also referenced in this way in my selected texts. In *Dinner at Rose's*, the description of Rose's old house includes the detail that: “The door in the living room has to be wedged shut with a 1972 copy of the *Woman's Weekly* to block the draughts” (3). In *Divine*, Tara and her teenage daughter Jen move into a 1970s house with dated decor in rural Waikato. Tara complains: “it was the complete antithesis of her gorgeous home in Auckland, which had once warranted a spread in *New Zealand House and Garden*.” (58).³³ This is a shorthand, meaning that Holman no longer needs to describe Tara's North Shore house in detail, because readers familiar with this magazine can easily imagine what it is like. As Tara adapts to the realities of living in the countryside and managing the farm, her daughter gives her books on stock rotation and maintaining optimal grass feed for the animals. The narration explains how: “Jen's books became Tara's beside reading, usurping *Fashion Quarterly*, *House and Garden*, and her favourite Deborah

³² *Shortland Street* is a New Zealand soap opera, set in an Auckland hospital, which began transmitting in 1992.

³³ *New Zealand House and Garden* is a monthly lifestyle and interiors magazine

Challinor” (163).³⁴ Consequently, Tara’s changing engagement with these publications reflects her change in priorities, as she sheds her glossy life in Auckland in order to embrace living on the farm.

However, the inclusion of these aspects of New Zealand media is not always significant in terms of character development. Primarily, they locate these narratives in a New Zealand cultural setting, distinct from the glamorous and cosmopolitan environments typical of British and North American chick lit. In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, the *Listener* is in the doctors’ waiting room (213).³⁵ In *Blackpeak Station*, after a damaging storm strikes the area surrounding the station, “someone from *Morning Report*” (86) leaves a message trying to get a statement or an interview for their broadcast.³⁶ In these instances, elements of New Zealand media are each only briefly mentioned, providing moments of recognition for readers familiar with New Zealand popular culture, but adding little to the overall development of the narrative. In others however, such as Tara’s changing taste in reading material detailed above, they add to characterisation. As these media products are all widely popular and well known in New Zealand, their inclusion gives readers something in common with the characters and invites them to identify with the protagonists.

³⁴ *Fashion Quarterly* is a seasonal New Zealand fashion magazine. Deborah Challinor is a popular writer of historical fiction set in New Zealand, such as her bestselling trilogy of *Tamar* (2002), *White Feathers* (2003), and *Blue Smoke* (2004).

³⁵ *The Listener* is a weekly current affairs and entertainment magazine which has been published since 1939.

³⁶ *Morning Report* is a weekday news slot on Radio New Zealand National that has aired since 1975.

New Zealand popular music is also frequently referenced in my selected texts. In *Divine*, when Tara wants to speak to her daughter about the possibility of leaving Auckland she “followed the noise of Opshop up the stairs and into Jennifer’s bedroom and turned off the CD player” (35).³⁷ Similarly, in *Blackpeak Station*, when Charlotte is driving she listens to: “the retrofit CD player belting out Don McGlashan songs over the rattling of the cab” (63).³⁸ More significantly in terms of narrative and character development, in *Knotted*, there is a series of references to the music of *Split Enz*.³⁹ The band’s “I See Red” is one of Danny’s favourite songs, and she dances to it when she’s angry with Ross early in the novel (77).⁴⁰ As the narrative progresses, Ross becomes interested:

Ross picked up Danny’s Split Enz CD. ‘Who’s this?’

‘One of the best New Zealand bands ever.’ (272)

This reinforces the cultural legacy of the band, as Ross is introduced to New Zealand pop music. Subsequently, Ross listens to the CD when he is driving:

As soon as he heard ‘I See Red’ he recognized it as the tune Danny had hummed a lot when they’d first met. When he heard the lyrics he laughed. Now he understood – and also realized that she seldom hummed it anymore. When he listened to the plaintive ‘Message to my Girl’ and Neil Finn sang about being scared to admit what he felt

³⁷ *Opshop* is a New Zealand pop band that formed in 2002.

³⁸ Don McGlashan is a New Zealand singer and songwriter.

³⁹ *Split Enz* was a popular New Zealand band that was active from 1972 to 1984.

⁴⁰ *I See Red* is a 1979 *Split Enz* song about anger, repeating the lyric “I See Red” several times during the chorus.

because it gave away too much, Ross knew exactly what he meant.

(309)

As such this series of *Split Enz* references reflects the development of Danny and Ross's relationship. Initially, Danny sings and dances to "I See Red" as she vents her frustrations with Ross. When she subsequently stops humming the song so frequently, it illustrates that she no longer sees Ross in this way. Meanwhile Ross – as a further demonstration of his integration into Kiwi culture – becomes acquainted with these popular New Zealand songs, identifying with the tender lyrics of "Message to My Girl", another song by the same band, as he falls in love with Danny.

All of the media products and music favoured by the protagonists of these selected texts are emphatically not aspects of "high" or elite culture. As such, their tastes are affirmed as down-to-earth and unpretentious, and exemplify the distinctions Bourdieu identifies between "the 'elite' of the dominant and the 'mass' of the dominated" (468). For instance, the characters listen to New Zealand pop songs, not New Zealand opera singer Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, and they watch popular television such as *Shortland Street* and *Outrageous Fortune* rather than highly critically acclaimed shows, such as Jane Campion's miniseries *Top of the Lake*. This reflects the protagonists' taste for popular entertainment rather than comparatively "higher" art forms. The characters' engagement with popular media reflects the status of the genre itself, and creates another link between protagonists and readers of these novels. As discussed in the introduction, chick lit has been much maligned by literary critics, who dismiss it as formulaic and therefore superficial. Nevertheless, readers of these novels are engaging with popular culture, just as the characters do. This further encourages readers to identify with the protagonists and their tastes, affirming popular culture as their preferred source of entertainment.

It is also significant that none of the characters are depicted as consuming any British or North American music or entertainment. In reality, New Zealand television and commercial radio are full of content from overseas. In these novels, New Zealand content is prioritised above that of other countries. Neill explains that “kiwiana enhances themes of nationhood that for many Pākehā New Zealanders provides a cultural text serving to differentiate them within an increasingly cosmopolitan/globalised world” (93). Embodying this argument, the characters’ preferences for local media affirm it as unique within a wider market. Their fictional enjoyment of this entertainment reflects the readers’ real life choice to read New Zealand chick lit, which likewise competes with the British and North American chick lit that is also widely read in New Zealand.

The cultural setting of my selected texts is further differentiated from those of British and North American chick lit through numerous references to New Zealand brands, products, and stores. Like the elements of popular culture included in these novels, such references convey particular connotations and associations. Trade Me is one such brand.⁴¹ In *Dinner at Rose’s*, Jo tells the receptionist at her physio practice: “more time doing work and less time bidding on clothes on Trade Me would be desirable” (46). Likewise, in *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, Trade Me is also depicted as a means of skiving at work, when Helen’s boss Nick tells Richard the receptionist at the vet office: “stop pissing around on Trade Me and go wash your ute” (133). These examples comically show that browsing on Trade Me is an appealing source of procrastination, keeping these characters from their practical duties. Nick’s instruction that Richard should clean his “ute” instead contrasts these activities and values practical work over this time-wasting activity, even though it may be enjoyable.

⁴¹ Trade Me is a popular New Zealand online buying and selling website.

Weetbix is another New Zealand product included in my selected texts.⁴² In *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, when Bel, Helen's young step-sister, meets Mark, an All Black, for the first time she declares: "you're on our Weetbix packet" (66). This relies on the readers' familiarity with this brand, and their knowledge that All Blacks frequently appear on their packaging and advertising material. Occasionally, All Blacks trading cards are included inside the packets, which can be collected and traded. This familiar brand is also included in *Blackpeak Station*. When Jen is frustrated with another driver in an instance of road rage, she exclaims to Charlotte: "They must be giving out driver's licences in bloody Weetbix packets again" (112). This comically refers to the trading cards sometimes distributed in these packets, implying that they are ubiquitous. Because of these cards, and the brand's slogan "Kiwi Kids are Weetbix Kids", Weetbix is heavily associated with New Zealand childhoods. As a result, though the references to this brand in my selected texts are largely light-hearted, they also evoke a sense of nostalgia, which further emphasises New Zealand as an ideal place for characters and the implied readers of these texts to grow up.

Another New Zealand brand referenced in my selected texts is The Warehouse.⁴³ In 2004, Bell observed "Aha! a likely future piece of future Kiwiana; the Warehouse" ("Kiwiana Revisited" 179). Its inclusion in my selected texts

⁴² Weetbix is a New Zealand breakfast cereal (although it is also made in Australia). It is often promoted in partnership with the All Blacks (the New Zealand national rugby team).

⁴³ The Warehouse is a multi-purpose retail store known for its slogan "Where Everyone Gets a Bargain".

suggests she was right. Early in *Divine*, Tara attempts to shop in the only designer boutique on the town's main street:

‘I don’t suppose you stock gumboots?’ she asked as the shop assistant wrapped the sandals.

‘No. Why don’t you try The Warehouse?’ (74)

Shortly after this recommendation, she does: “Tara examined the selection of navy, green and black rubber boots at the big red shed” (74). Readers familiar with the store will recognise that the “big red shed” is a colloquial name for The Warehouse, though this is not explained in the text. Tara’s trip to this store to buy gumboots reflects the beginning of her development into a rural resident, rather than a “townie”. The Warehouse is also included in *Dinner at Rose’s*. Jo’s friend Claire, a mother of three young children, complains that the local stores stock terrible clothes and that she has no time to drive into the city just to go shopping. Jo wryly asks her if she’s resorted to “Heather Anne’s Fashions” in the main street of Waimanu, “where you could find any number of blouses made of peach-coloured polyester but almost nothing else” (11). In response, Clare is downcast: “‘not quite,’ said Clare glumly. ‘The Warehouse. And I got a lovely pair of jeans at Farmlands last week.’” (34).⁴⁴ Neither of these outlets are known for their fashion, and readers familiar with either store will recognise connotations of being “mumsy” and unsophisticated. As such, Clare’s taste in clothing is framed as practical and possibly unattractive, though she is not ecstatic with her purchases. This implies a kind of solidarity with and appreciation for those who eschew conventionally feminine standards of taste and fashion, and make the best of the clothes they can find, as discussed in Chapter One. The inclusion of

⁴⁴ Farmlands is a farmer owned co-operative, which sells fencing, silage, and farm wear among other rural supplies.

popular New Zealand brands in this way further illustrates how my selected texts integrate local elements with conventions of the chick lit genre.

The references to events, brands, and recognisable aspects of New Zealand culture in my selected texts are only ever brief because the primary concern of these novels is to present an entertaining narrative. However there are many of them, more than is possible to include in this section. Consequently, it is the volume of these recognisable elements that cumulatively adds to the mythic sense of New Zealand cultural identity evoked within these novels. As Bell explains: “[m]yths and symbols can survive in popular consciousness only if there is daily evidence of support” (“Kiwiana Revisited” 177). Evidently, my selected texts provide further support for these myths, relying on readers’ familiarity with these elements to evoke a positive sense of New Zealand. Bell also explains that aspects of Kiwiana are frequently used as a “recognition trigger” in advertising material (“Kiwiana Revisited” 180), encouraging viewers to buy particular products. With New Zealand chick lit novels however, readers are not being asked to buy anything tangible, they have already bought the book. Instead, readers are asked to “buy in” to these images and signs of “New Zealandness”, a recognisable myth of home. Ultimately, the settings of these novels are constructed with reference to both geographical and cultural elements, which distinctly locate these novels in New Zealand. These settings are significantly different from those of British and North American chick lit, and reproduce a fanciful, familiar, and idyllic version of New Zealand in order to appeal to the implied readers of these novels.

CONCLUSION

The study of my selected texts reveals that New Zealand chick lit novels are the product of two influences. The conventions of British and North American chick lit and popular understandings of New Zealand cultural identity have a clear impact on the characterisation and representations of women, men, and settings in these texts. Irrespective of the country it comes from, chick lit focuses primarily on female characters' lives, which vary in print as much as they do in reality. All of the authors are women, so are the central protagonists, and largely, so are many readers of the genre. So even though this thesis analyses representations of male characters and settings as well as the female characters, all of these elements are constructed and filtered through an imagined "female" point of view. My selected texts revise and reproduce familiar myths of "New Zealandness", departing from the conventions of British and North American chick lit in a number of ways, even as they follow similar formulaic narratives and import (while adapting to local conditions) some elements from their overseas models.

The central characters' appearances and their attitudes to personal presentation are one of the most notable differences between typical British and North American chick lit and my selected texts. The protagonists in my selected novels collectively eschew conventionally feminine conceptions of beauty, fashion, and shopping. As discussed in Chapter One, they instead repeatedly show a preference for practical clothing, such as a "pair of old tracksuit pants" (*Blackpeak Station* 38), a "polar fleece vest" (*Dinner at Rose's* 258), or a "thick, fleecy blue sweatshirt" (*Divine* 260). The "Right Men" in my selected texts favour a similarly low-maintenance aesthetic, and demonstrably reject any hint of metrosexual or conventionally homosexual male appearances. However, crucially, both the protagonist and her "Mr. Right" are still

attractive, and retain the ability to be well dressed when the occasion demands it – even if it takes an event such as the Oscars, as it does for Danny in *Knotted* (365). Clearly, this is an important distinction between these New Zealand texts and those of overseas. *Goodreads* reviews of my selected texts suggest that readers of these novels appreciate these differences.⁴⁵ This comment on *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* praises the novel: “Has a great NZ flavour, and avoids clichés and stereotypes [of the genre] - when the main character is frequently described as having cow shit on her face, you know it's not typical chick lit!” (“Goodreads: Chocolate Cake for Breakfast”). Likewise, this reviewer of *Dinner at Rose’s* observes the practical streak running through the novel, linking it to the setting: “It is set in a rural community and therefore is more gumboots than high heels”, giving it five stars (“Goodreads: Dinner at Rose’s”). As such, it is clear that practicality reigns supreme when it comes to these protagonists’ clothing choices, and that readers appreciate this sensibility.

This rejection of glamour is also reflected in the chosen careers of the protagonists. While the protagonists of British and North American chick lit have been described as favouring careers in “glam industries” (Yardley 8), those in my selected texts are likelier to work in more caring and less apparently pretentious professions. As physiotherapists, nurses, large animal veterinarians, and farmers, the work chosen by these characters is depicted as more worthwhile, down to earth, and distinctly unglamorous. These careers are often tied to the predominantly rural settings of these novels, rather than the comparatively cosmopolitan locations favoured in British and North American texts, further casting the protagonists as highly capable and pragmatic, rather than ditzy or squeamish.

⁴⁵ *Goodreads* is a website that allows readers to award books a rating of one to five stars, and to post their own personal reviews.

The additional responsibilities of the protagonists in my selected texts further contribute to their characterisation as capable and independent. The protagonists in my selected texts manage their various responsibilities of family, work, domestic and manual labour, and are not immune to stress. This reflects the postfeminist sensibility that although feminism has made it possible for women to do many things, such a multitude of choice has not necessarily made life easier for women. This reproduces one convention of typical British and North American chick lit, as conveniently, the protagonist's romantic union with their "Mr. Right" coincides with the resolution of her stress, which at least becomes easier to manage in a heterosexual long-term relationship. Consequently, though these multiple responsibilities emphasise the protagonists' personal strength and capability, they are also an opportunity for the love interests of these novels to demonstrate their emotional perceptiveness and so to alleviate the protagonists' stress.

The representations of male characters in my selected texts are also linked to enduring popular mythologies and conceptions of New Zealand cultural identity, as discussed in Chapter Two. Some recognisable characteristics of the Kiwi Bloke stereotype are included as characteristics of the central love interests in these New Zealand chick lit novels, such as beer drinking, rugby, farming, and laconicism. Others however are omitted, like derisive attitudes to women and domesticity. Most significantly, these characters are additionally framed as caring, empathetic, and particularly attuned to the needs and desires of the protagonists, clearly depicting them as their "implied Right Men", to use Smoczyńska's term (32). Consequently, the characterisation of these love interests relies on elements of both the Kiwi Bloke stereotype and the idealised traits – suitably localised – of their equivalents in British and North American chick lit.

These central love interests are affirmed as ideal partners for the protagonist through their contrast to the “Mr. Wrongs” in these novels. These “other” men are depicted as arrogant and pretentious, and are not sensitive to the particular needs of the protagonists, thereby rendering them as undesirable partners. Unlike the Right Men, these characters are often depicted as taking an excessive interest in their own appearance. In this regard, the fashionable aesthetic typical of British and North American love interests is assigned to the undesirable men in my selected texts, further differentiating these New Zealand chick lit novels from much of the genre. By the end of the narrative these characters are comprehensively cast aside in favour of the central love interests, implying that these traits are not appealing to protagonists or readers of these novels. However, some “others” are better received, such as homosexual men in the case of Stu in *Dinner at Rose’s*, or even transgender characters, as seen in Richard’s transition into Rachel in *Divine*. These vastly more sympathetic representations suggest that protagonists and readers of these novels have more progressive gender politics – but only to the extent of more minor characters outside the central romantic narrative. As such, in a stark contrast to British and North American chick lit, metrosexual, heterosexual males are perhaps the most derided characters in these novels.

The geographical and cultural settings of these novels definitively locates them in New Zealand, and reflects popular mythologies about New Zealand identity. As discussed in Chapter Three, my selected texts are predominantly set in rural locations, which facilitate the characters’ close relationships to “nature” – or rather, the pastoral version of it presented in these texts and privileged in some mythic portrayals of New Zealand. Even novels set in cities carefully retain this connection. For example, in *Knotted*, Holman includes farmyard animals in Danny’s suburban

garden, and frames Auckland's scenery and beaches as integral aspects of the characters' daily lives. Though the frequently featured rural settings are often described ironically and mock the provincialism typically associated with small town New Zealand, these novels simultaneously depict the provinces as ideal places for the characters to live. This is reinforced by many characters' common distaste for urban lifestyles, which is in stark opposition to the typical settings of British and North American chick lit. Reviews of my selected novels on the Goodreads website frequently cite the New Zealand setting of these novels as being a particular highlight of their reading experience. For example, this commenter wrote of *Blackpeak Station*: "Neat to see something homegrown and was able to clearly visualise the setting with ease having visited many of the places" ("Goodreads: *Blackpeak Station*"), while another reviewer of *Divine* wrote: "It's always nice to read books set in familiar locations and [t]his captures the charm of the Waikato" ("Goodreads: *Divine*"). This illustrates the sense of familiarity and warmth evoked by these novels' settings, which reproduce popular myths of New Zealand geography often found in tourism and marketing material.

The cultural setting of my selected texts also establishes the New Zealand location of these novels, differentiating them from British and North American chick lit. The New Zealand accent, elements of Māori culture and language, iconic brands and products such as Weet-bix, The Warehouse, and the All Blacks, as well as national magazines and television shows are included in these, carrying a variety of specific connotations and implications only accessible to readers familiar with them. The inclusion of these aspects reveals the tastes of the characters that engage with these products and places, but also enhances the sense of "New Zealandness" produced in these novels. Again, reviewers on Goodreads note this as a particular

feature they enjoy about my selected texts. In this review of *Knotted*, a reader comments: “Loved the New Zealand feel to this book once again,” and rated it five stars (“Goodreads: Knotted”). Another comments on *Dinner at Rose’s*, describing it as:

a feel good romance with some country characters who speak good old New Zild. When you come from an English speaking country of 4 million people, your media is dominated by American or English culture and language, so it's refreshing to hear Kiwi speech.
(“Goodreads: Dinner at Rose’s”).

I think this captures one of the most significant aspects of the appeal of these New Zealand chick lit novels: their differences from British and North American texts of the genre. From the distinctly less glamorous protagonists, settings, and enlightened Kiwi Bloke love interests, to the New Zealand accent and vernacular particularly referenced by the above reviewer, these novels offer a different take on the chick lit formula by appealing to popular conceptions of New Zealand cultural identity. That they are mythic, rather than accurate representations, does little to reduce their appeal.

However, these novels still reproduce many conventions of the genre, namely the inclusion of female characters’ careers and additional responsibilities alongside the romantic narrative formula. As such, they embody a key feature of chick lit referenced throughout this thesis, to reflect a fusion of the realities and fantasies of contemporary women. My analysis reveals that the realities and fantasies depicted in my selected texts are conservative in many ways, including the centrality of heterosexual relationships, the predominantly middle class Pākeha characters, and the marginalisation of aspects of Māori culture. So too is the reassurance that New Zealand is an idyllic place to live, where characters’ relationships to nature are of

personal and emotional significance, concealing how many native bush landscapes were destroyed in the pursuit of apparently “natural” agricultural and rural settlements. This suggests that readers of these novels are enchanted by depictions of New Zealand life as more idyllic and less complicated than it is in reality.

However, to conclude exclusively that these novels are wholly conservative fails to comprehend the progressive capacity of this genre, and would unjustly add to the body of work – both in the public and academic domains – that dismisses chick lit, which is outlined in the introduction. The analysis of my selected texts shows that the genre’s capabilities are more nuanced. Certainly, the characterisation of the central love interests requires the Kiwi Bloke stereotype to be revised to exclude its tendencies toward violence and isolation in favour of sensitivity and empathy, as well as progressive gender politics. Furthermore, chick lit unapologetically frames the female protagonists’ contemporary concerns as being of the uppermost importance. As in British and North American chick lit, this enables my selected texts to address particular issues, especially in relation to women’s lives. The protagonists of my selected texts are variously depicted as caring for terminally ill family members (*Dinner at Rose’s*), preparing to become mothers (*Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*), grieving (*Knotted*), relearning how to be independent (*Divine*) and gaining expertise and overcoming sexism in an industry typically dominated by men (*Blackpeak Station*), each balancing these demands with those of their resolutely un-glamorous careers. Though these are perhaps traditional female concerns, they remain significant aspects of the protagonists’ lives that many readers of the genre are likely to relate to. As such, they ought not to be dismissed or belittled. These elements are not unique to New Zealand chick lit, and do not reproduce conventional myths about New Zealand cultural identity. However, given the genre’s aforementioned fusion of women’s

realities and fantasies, the inclusion of these aspects in my selected texts suggests they reflect the particular realities and fantasies of contemporary New Zealand women.

Ultimately, the study of New Zealand chick lit offers insights into universal social issues and concerns, the ongoing development of local cultural mythologies, and an understanding of how the representations of women, men, and settings are carefully constructed to appeal to readers.

APPENDIX ONE: BRIEF SYNOPSES OF THE SELECTED TEXTS

***Divine*, by Michelle Holman (2008)**

The novel begins when Tara's husband Richard comes out as transgender, tells her he wants a divorce, and that he is planning to transition into a woman. Her previously content life as a housewife on Auckland's North Shore is disrupted, and to escape the gossip, she and her teenage daughter Jen move to the fictional rural Waikato small town *Divine*. There, she meets Gil, who lives and works on a neighbouring farm. Needing to financially support herself and her daughter, Tara accepts a job in telephone sex and with Gil's support, she learns to manage the farm. Meanwhile, a subplot of this novel focuses on Barney Bigelow, a local property developer who is secretly trying to establish a shopping mall in the small town, which would damage several small businesses. A group of retired and elderly people living in a retirement home foil this plan, just as Gil and Tara resolve to be a couple long-term. The epilogue reveals that they have a new baby, Tara returns to university to complete her degree, and they remain on good terms with her ex-husband, who is now Rachel.

***Knotted*, by Michelle Holman (2009)**

This novel is set in an un-named part of Auckland. Danny is the sole guardian of her recently deceased sister's children, Matt and Mia. Their father was Patrick Fabello, who has also died, and kept the fact that he had children a secret from his own family, who live in America. Patrick's brother, Ross, discovers that he has a niece and nephew living in New Zealand, and encouraged by his parents and sisters, he comes to Auckland to track them down. Danny is threatened by his arrival, and fears that he will attempt to gain custody of the children and take them away from her. Despite their initial hostilities they eventually fall in love. Meanwhile, Danny seeks to make

contact with her Māori extended family, who she has never known because her mother was estranged from them. The novel ends after Danny has a breast cancer scare, the same illness that her mother and sister died from, and Ross supports her through this time. In the epilogue, Danny and Ross attend the Academy Awards, where Ross wins an Oscar for a screenplay he has written.

***Dinner at Rose's*, by Danielle Hawkins (2012)**

This novel is set in the fictional rural North Island town of Waimanu. The protagonist Jo Donnelly returns home to New Zealand “in the wake of an unfortunate best-friend-and-boyfriend-caught-having-sex-in-a-chair incident” (inside book cover), leaving behind her glamorous Melbourne career, friends and apartment to rebuild her life from the comfort of small town New Zealand. Her eccentric honorary aunt Rose proves to be a source of strength and comfort, and when she falls ill with cancer, Jo moves in to help take care of her. In the midst of dealing with the stresses of work, looking after Rose, and mending her broken heart, Jo realises she has fallen in love with her childhood friend Matt. His eager girlfriend Cilla proves to be an obstacle to their union. Ultimately, Rose interferes to ensure Jo and Matt will live happily ever after before she dies.

***Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, by Danielle Hawkins (2013)**

This novel is set in the fictional rural North Island small town of Broadview. The protagonist Helen McNeil does not recognise the famous (fictional) All Black Mark Tipene when she meets him at a local party one evening until her cousin points it out to her later that night. He is enchanted by her, and pursues a romantic relationship with her while still playing rugby and preparing for the upcoming World Cup. Helen

becomes unexpectedly pregnant just months into their relationship, and after considering an abortion and fearing that people will think she has “trapped” Mark with a baby, with the support of her extended family she and Mark decide to keep it, though not without some relationship difficulties along the way. By the end of the novel, they resolve to be a couple, move to Auckland, and the All Blacks win the Rugby World Cup.

***Blackpeak Station*, by Holly Ford (2013)**

This novel is set in a South Island high country sheep station in the McKenzie Basin. It opens with the death of the protagonist’s father in a farming accident. Her brother, Nick, much to Charlotte’s disappointment, solely inherits the station. Nick is not interested in farming, and appoints Charlotte to manage the station herself, and she later buys shares in the property. As such, she meets Rob, the farm’s accountant, and they soon form a relationship which is ended when he accepts a job in Christchurch – even though he offers to turn it down to be with Charlotte. In the wake of this breakup, Charlotte meets and forms a relationship with Luke, a property developer, and they become engaged. Unknown to her, Luke is planning to develop the station into a luxury resort and hotel after they get married. She discovers the deception and breaks off the relationship. Soon after this, the February 22nd Christchurch Earthquake strikes, and when Charlotte is unable to make contact with Rob to see if he is safe, she realises she is still in love with him. Fortunately, he survives, and they are later reunited when they are both guests at Nick’s wedding. Rob suggests he move to the station and become part of the staff, and Charlotte agrees.

APPENDIX TWO: TABLE OF NEW ZEALAND CHICK LIT

My Selected Texts:

Text:	Author: Date:	Protagonist	Love interest	Setting	Other points of interest
<i>Dinner at Rose's</i>	Danielle Hawkins 2012	Physiotherapist	Dairy Farmer	Rural small town, King Country	
<i>Chocolate Cake for Breakfast</i>	Danielle Hawkins 2013	Veterinarian	All Black (Professional rugby player)	Rural small town, Waikato	
<i>Knotted</i>	Michelle Holman 2009	Senior Nurse	Writer	Auckland	Danny, the Protagonist, is Māori. Ross, the love interest is North American.
<i>Divine</i>	Michelle Holman 2008	Telephone sex worker, farm manager, and finally a student.	Dairy Farmer	Rural small town, Waikato	
<i>Blackpeak Station</i>	Holly Ford 2013	High Country Station Manager	Rural Accountant, then Shepherd	Rural South Island sheep station, McKenzie District.	

Additional New Zealand Chick Lit Texts:⁴⁶

Text:	Author: Date:	Protagonist	Love interest	Setting	Other points of interest
<i>Bonkers</i>	Michelle Holman 2007	Primary School Teacher	Doctor, at a hospital.	Auckland City	This novel crosses over into realms of the supernatural, as the catalyst for the narrative is the protagonist's death, but she is sent back to earth in a different body.
<i>Barefoot</i>	Michelle Holman 2010	Police Officer, in the Domestic Violence unit.	Ex-Basketball player in the NBA. (Professional sportsperson)	Auckland City	
<i>Hand me Down</i>	Michelle Holman 2011	Cherry orchardist	Ex-Army, now owns a cherry orchard	Rural small town, Central Otago.	

⁴⁶ This table does not include every chick lit novel ever set in New Zealand, but I have endeavoured to provide information about as many as possible.

<i>Blackpeak Vines</i>	Holly Ford 2014	Ex-television producer, now owns a vineyard	Farmer	Rural South Island Sheep Station, MacKenzie District.	Sequel to Blackpeak Station. The protagonist, Lizzie, is a mature woman with an adult daughter, suggesting this novel is “Hen Lit” – chick lit about older women.
<i>The Road to Lilyfields</i>	Lottie Bloom 2015	Bank teller, a job she leaves to take over a rural property.	Landscaper/Handyman	Rural Banks Peninsula	
<i>Split Time</i>	Felicity Price 2005	Public Relations	Accountant	Unspecified New Zealand City	The first novel in the Penny Rushmore trilogy. The protagonist is a mature woman with teenage children, suggesting this novel is “Hen Lit” – chick lit about older women.
<i>A Sandwich Short of a Picnic</i>	Felicity Price 2008	Public Relations	Public Relations	Unspecified New Zealand City	The second novel in the Penny Rushmore trilogy. The protagonist is a mature woman with teenage children, suggesting this novel is “Hen Lit” – chick lit about older women.
<i>Head Over Heels</i>	Felicity Price 2010	Public Relations	Public Relations	Unspecified New Zealand City	The third novel in the Penny Rushmore trilogy. The protagonist is a mature woman with teenage children, suggesting this novel is “Hen Lit” – chick lit about older women.
<i>A Jolt to the Heart</i>	Felicity Price 2014	Ex-Journalist, now a journalism lecturer	Political Journalist/Blogger	Christchurch	The protagonist is a mature woman with grown up children, suggesting this novel aligns with “Hen Lit” – chick lit about older women.
<i>The Paris Inheritance</i>	Merryn Corcoran 2014	Fashion Designer	Rugby player for the All Blacks (Professional Sports person)	The first quarter of the novel is set in rural New Zealand, the rest is set in Europe.	

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